

## CANINE WEATHER

By ELIZABETH HAN

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*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

1 Corinthians 13:12  
King James Version

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For the fourth time in as many years, they were confronted with the problem of who would take Lucy if, this time, they really did break up.

Don't have a baby to save a relationship and don't rescue a dog either, thought Amanda, pushing soapy water in circles around the bottom of Lucy's bowl. Joe washed all of Lucy's things by hand even though she had selected each piece to be dishwasher-safe, and for some reason she could not find the resolve to countermand him.

When she finished with the dishes she would take Lucy around the lake; they would nose through the hip-high reeds for belching belts of frogs, which never failed to get Lucy picking up her feet as though she were line-dancing. Afterwards, Amanda planned to sit on a log and run a rubber brush through Lucy's fur, which was going through its November shed, and which, since the small shiba inu had turned eight, had developed threads of white to match the urajiro markings on her cheeks and brow.

Amanda and Joe had not walked Lucy together in six months. They used to explain to their friends, it didn't make sense, living north of a certain latitude, for them both to freeze their nether parts off just to worship at the altar of together-time. On the rare occasion they attended parties, only one drove home for the task while the other kept on drinking and gossiping and representing the couple. But now she was afraid if she talked about logic it would lead to defending the logic of a breakup and people she didn't care to have on her side might feel compelled to choose a side. They were technically Joe's friends anyway.

She and Lucy returned from their circuit, Amanda having worked up a sweat. She tossed a stack of mail on the floor. A bright red envelope remained in her hand, a reminder card from Joe's much-despised and over-achieving coworker, Alan, to save the date for his and his wife Sophia's housewarming in eight days' time. With the jab of a pushpin Amanda affixed the card inside to a message board hanging from the wall. Time was almost up, she thought—Joe was supposed to pick up some sort of gift for them. Still, he had not seemed perturbed by his lack of shopping in the least, much more concerned with complaining about the necessity of attending at all, if he wanted to stay in his boss's good graces, and Amanda had silently set aside a duo of pillar candles in tissue paper for when he inevitably forgot and looked to her for saving.

Lucy flopped over on the rug and tilted her back paws to the side, exposing the peony-pink of her belly, its four never-used nipples pointing at Amanda obscenely.

"Give your dog its food," Joe said through a crack in the bathroom door.

"When did Lucy become my dog and an 'it'?" Amanda asked. She had not realized he was home. The bathroom on the main floor was added as an afterthought in the wedge space beneath the stairs and he used it like a command centre, a disembodied voice saying do this and do that.

She unclipped the leash and folded it into a spare wastebasket they kept in the closet along with Lucy's other objects. She held her nose as she stepped past the bathroom, ignoring the flash of a belt buckle and a hairy muscular thigh the color of crab bisque.

It made her sick, the way he had been speaking lately, as if he had completely forgotten that on the day Lucy came to them, he and Amanda had sat together at the dining room table and completed the adoption contract as co-owners. How hard they had worked to present themselves as the ideal couple and home all in the service of one goal. That at the culmination of a two-month process of phone calls and interrogations, however much he tried to avoid responsibility, he was as much to blame for their predicament as she was. Instead, he had had the gall to face her not two days before and list, in the brisk business-like tone he used when speaking to children and sycophantic undergraduates in the university research lab where he worked, all the reasons he was ready to give Lucy up.

"She was a birthday present for you, so it's only fair the gift stays with the giftee," he had said.

"No," she replied.

Her birthday had passed, actually, by fifty-seven days when Lucy came to them. She was certain; she had counted. It had been a Thursday, and it had snowed overnight, the first of the season, a lacey layer covering the lawn ornaments and topiary and their two-person canoe with the tarp pulled over at the end of their dock, though the lake, pocked with tiny wavelets, had not yet frozen over. They had performed nearly to perfection, even fastidious Joe could say that, the house spotless, not a dish in the sink, the floors, counters, and walls scrubbed nearly raw. Joe had counted out eighteen new twenty-dollar bills, nine from him and nine from her. He had pushed them across the table to the lady from the Humane Society, while the dog, which had also appeared to inspect their apartment and found it acceptable, already dozed at their feet, its tail swishing over Amanda's bare toes. She had painted her nails silver for the occasion.

She remembered everything. He insulted her by implying that she didn't.

But Joe, she well knew, was past the time of courtesy and respect. These days, there was nothing left of the bloom that had given over to things in the initial months after they adopted the dog, when, caught up in the whirlwind of objects, treats, and training, they had lavished as much attention on each other as they did Lucy. Perhaps because he had come up with the idea during her first hospitalization, his investment showed back then, when he proposed new dates and outings just to spend more time as a triptych. Now, they hardly spoke, kept different hours, and, in their eagerness to punish each other, Lucy suffered most of all. Calling her "it" was only the latest transgression. Joe hardly even pet her anymore; Lucy pushed her muzzle against his arm and was lucky if he deigned to smile at her listlessly.

Behind the door, the toilet flushed.

"Hello? Did you hear me? I said—" She removed the bag of dog food from under the sink and Lucy's bowl, measuring out five full scoops of a pellet-like kibble. But before she could finish, she was cut off by the faucet running, followed by the click of the bathroom door shutting, with a sound halfway between a snap and a slam.

"—Jesus," she said.

With her other hand she experimented with holding the fingers out in the air and grasping in Joe's direction, opening and closing their shape, making at first a fist, then a net, one and the other, back and forth, over and over again, in the manner of a claw arcade game gone wrong, stuck on difficult.

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The next evening, at cocktail hour, they attended a celebration at an upscale tapas place on Portugal Cove Road, ostensibly of the research group's latest work, but more accurately, of Alan. The ambitious third-year neurosurgery resident, hair newly refreshed black, had just defended his doctorate thesis that afternoon and was moreover about to publish in *Nature Medicine*. Everyone was calling him Doctor Squared and alternately Doctor Nature and chortling as if it were the most hilarious joke ever.

Science, as Joe always said, was a bitch, but even more so with Doctor Squared around. Working as a PhD in a research group headed by an MD who tended to hire residents she knew from rotations, Joe was always going to end up a second-class citizen. His PI had ordered him to work with Alan for the next few months, essentially cleaning up the dregs of the resident's project for one more paper, while Alan went back to his clinical blocks. Alan might come to visit once or twice a week, but, make no mistake, Joe, the lowly PhD, not a real doctor in their books, would be doing the work. The new project sluggishly took shape, but the scheduled appearances did not: the resident had made a single visit to the lab in seven weeks and promptly left when a technician told him Joe, who was meeting a student, would be out in ten minutes. Joe had edgily confronted his co-worker in a queue for teriyaki in the cafeteria, receiving a less-than-satisfactory response.

"Do you know what he told me?" Joe had told her one morning, as he stood in front of the full-length mirror, holding up a salmon-coloured sweater to his chest. He was barefoot, but appeared to have already settled on a pair of cream corduroys held up by a new belt of braided leather. It was an outfit of which Amanda approved because she had purchased its components. " 'Sorry, couldn't wait. You know, *savin' lives.*' And then he tried to buy me off with teriyaki. Are you kidding me?"

Amanda supposed that now, after all these months and stories, she despised Alan just as much as Joe did. In fact, she despised everyone at the stupid event. She barfed a little in her throat each time she heard the use of Doctor Squared, but on the whole, maintained a springy smile which she lasered at each student, doctor, scientist who came near. At her side, Joe, she was aware, wore an equally strained expression—to have to celebrate his worst enemy in a *huis clos* was destroying him from the inside, nuclear fission style. At least she was not the one obligated to stay till the bitter end.

After downing a non-alcoholic beer, she pinched Joe's elbow and explained to the group, "Time to take the dog out, you know."

"Aw, stay!" cried random people she did not know.

Amanda caught Joe's eye through the bottom of the champagne he was tipping into his throat. He blinked slowly and swallowed. "You guys will see her next time," he said. "She's such a good Mama to Luce. Everyone, give her a clap."

Politely, Amanda ducked past a server and headed for the parking lot, the claps which followed in her wake, she thought, sounding like wet firecrackers.

She did not have anything in common with these people. At one time their STEM degrees had impressed her, but after years of accompanying Joe to these things and being privy to his complaints over dinner, she understood their world involved even more backstabbing and politicking than her boring admin job in publishing. Plus, his colleagues loved to make condescending comments about how they could never do what she did and compare how long it had been since they had read their last book.

At home, Amanda stood at the centre island in their kitchen and fixed herself a finger of gin in a tumbler. Cracking open the fridge she added a dollop of tonic water overtop, sighing at the bitter taste of the quinine while Lucy pawed over and promptly sat on Amanda's foot, having already dragged her leash herself to the door.

“Alright,” she told Lucy, rinsing out the glass. “I’m coming.”

She pulled on fleece-lined galoshes, always useful for inopportune shallows and stagnant puddles fecund with mosquitoes, and reached inside the collar of her coat to pull up the zipper on her fleece all the way to her chin. Lucy immediately left the wheatish circle given off by the porch light and Amanda stumbled after her. As they began their usual circuit about the lake, except in the opposite direction from the morning, her phone lit up with a text from Joe: “Should I sneak a cookie out for you?”

“Oh, fuck off,” she addressed the phone and purged the message. It was too much, it really was.

For several minutes they continued to mosey along by the faint wash of light from the houses of the neighbours, most of whom drew the shades of their ground level floor-to-ceiling windows in the early evening and whose back gardens extended for ten to twenty meters before sloping down to the gravel and the uneven shoreline. The air smelled of cut grass. From the far side of the lake pinpricks of varying intensity formed earthly constellations and, nosed behind a bank of clouds, the moon’s white eye betrayed its presence by tinting the sky with midnight blue.

In this light, the bending bulrushes which grew from shallows between crops of smooth rock looked like giant overlapping spiders. One scratched a finger along her face and Amanda, scrunching up her eyes, bat at it with the wrong hand, inadvertently dropping the leash.

She cursed. A bit more drunk than she thought, she did not immediately think to use the flashlight on her phone to locate it. For a minute she swiped ineffectually, in a crouch, squinting at the grass.

“Luce, stay,” she called, so the dog would know not to go far from the path. Unlike most of her breed, Lucy obeyed commands and did not have much of a prey drive. She called again, when no noise answered her. “Luce?”

Suddenly, she heard a bark somewhere to her eleven ‘o clock. Scrambling back to her feet, she held her phone in front of her and called out, “Luce. To me!” A swish of red fur appeared and splashed before turning around. She saw the leash, picked it up, and gasped. She blinked furiously and looked back, too shocked to get any closer. But Lucy was nosing around the rocks, and all she had in her mouth was grass. She often chewed grass. The vet said it would settle her stomach, that dogs knew something about self-medication. Whatever Amanda saw was just a trick of the light.

She stood still and they played a staring game as she waited for her heart to slow.

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It was the first time the vision had come in the waking hours. For months she had had the same nightmare, of walking with Lucy through fields where the corn plants went over their heads. Every time, Lucy would disappear and she would follow a path of trampled plants to something she could not see but about which an air-sucking sense of foreboding gathered, where negative space bunched everything else around.

What could it mean? Her belief in fate did not extend to the occult; she had learnt not to trust her dreams after her first commitment in the psychiatry wing as a teen, when she was first introduced to the meds which were known to cause disturbed sleep and distortions. Her mother had subscribed to certain superstitions when she was little—for example, Mother refused to walk past a statue or representation of a Buddha—and it was hard to forget old habits.

It was, of course, Joe who had put the beginnings of terrifying images in her head in the first place, through an email she wished she had never opened.

RE: LUCY  
From: rjosephhearst

Solomon had once faced this very conundrum, when two women sought his judgment over a baby, both of them claiming to be its mother. The king, after hearing their impassioned pleas, thought for a moment before ruling: cut the child in two and give each woman half. The real mother, hearing this, sprang up and insisted the baby be given to the other woman to save its life. Solomon ordered the baby given to the real mother.

She carefully composed a reply in a new tab.

RE: RE: LUCY  
From: alarkin

Except in this case, neither of us wants the baby. Are you proposing that we halve nothing? Half of nothing is nothing, so we each get nothing, so the dog goes back to the society. You don't want that, so does that make you the real mother? So you should get the dog? Or is it shouldn't? I'm confused.

She did not understand how he could be so cavalier about it all, how he could give no quarter. Was this to be her reward for standing at his side for so many years? She was not ungrateful for his help; indeed, the awareness that she owed her health to him loomed large over her days, the hospitalizations every few months as her mood made transcendent arcs of apices and trenches. But she was no parasite. She had supported him through grad school, countless failed experiments and proposals, promising collaborations which never came to be. When the MD running his group, instead of writing Joe a reference, asked him to write it himself, she took one look at his disgusted face and fired off a Pulitzer-worthy piece in an evening—he won the award. She had convinced him to quit smoking and get into shape. They went vegan together just before she was in the hospital and then they went back to consuming dairy, then eggs, then meat, assuaging each other's guilt at each step.

She began typing something else. Her pinkie hovered over the delete key, and following a moment of hesitation, struck down viciously, until the capitals yielded to a blank line. Her breathing slowed as she considered her options.

Between them, however much they fought, there were certain words that did not have to be said. He knew she didn't want to break up, of course he knew. She never wanted to break up, he would have replied. She had no concept of when to give up, no lines in the sand. Like when she processed groceries in their fridge which had started to turn, cutting off the darkened squishy bits, imagining slapdash new recipes in her head, one of the habits he tolerated because she was otherwise an excellent cook. To her everything was workable, he would say, derisively. To her everything was weather.

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She decided to pose the question about the visions to Hiram. On Thursdays, Amanda went to see her therapist who was different from her psychiatrist, Dr. Wilson, who monitored her medications. Hiram had re-done the drapes and flowers since her last visit to reflect a green and blue theme and laid out a new type of cookie beside the water jug opposite his desk, which tasted gritty between her teeth. But Hiram, instead of answering, wanted to know whether she had reconsidered taking Lucy. Sometimes she wondered why she paid a hundred and twenty dollars an hour to have someone appear to take Joe's side.

"I've been having dreams," she said, hesitating over the syllables. She suspected dreams was a less controversial word than visions. She eyed the feathered dreamcatchers hanging from suction cups over the window overlooking the street. "In the dreams, she's barking and sounds hurt. But I can't see what's happened. She won't show me."

Hiram said, "I can see why that would be distressing. You might want to journal this. Are you doing your thought journal?"

Amanda nodded, though she neglected to say she was using it as a people-watching book instead, noting snippets of their conversations, especially interesting exclamations. She was a collector of language in her spare time, of etymologies and synonyms.

"I haven't told Joe," she admitted. "He doesn't believe in—in fact, / don't believe in. This."

"This?"

"I don't even think he would hear if I told him. He wasn't always so dismissive," she said. "But this breakup, this Lucy business. Calling her an 'it.'"

"And yet," Hiram said. "It's been months, right, since the threats of dissolving your relationship? What are your thoughts about why he hasn't moved out, if he's so adamant? Done something to initiate the break besides...?"

"Besides complaining?" Amanda poured herself a cup of water from the pitcher next to the sofa, but did not drink from it. "Well, he sometimes pulls out the sofa in the den for a few days. I'm getting the sense he wants the Lucy Conundrum sorted out first."

Since Amanda had known Joe, he had had a strict internal sense of hierarchy, though rarely expressed, a sense of the order in which things should go. It gave her some satisfaction that she could suspend him on the very first item on the list, the keystone to the breakup. Not a cent had been moved from their joint bank account, nothing packed, nothing truly actionable. His parents hadn't an inkling, at least she didn't think so. They had booked tickets a few weeks before, while the prices at the airline they frequented were good, to spend Christmas in Surrey, surrounded by all Joe's family, and Amanda's would get New Year's, the typical equitable and rational arrangement.

Hiram's pen scratched lines of black ink across his notebook. "Other possible stressors?" he asked. "Not all of this may be about you or Lucy, despite what it may feel like at times."

"Well, there's work." Amanda told him about Doctor Squared. "Joe's basically a second-class citizen there after these real doctors, as they call themselves. This guy doesn't show up for meetings because he's 'saving lives' – that's a direct quote – and he's going to take all the credit when Joe gets this paper published. He's hosting a housewarming we're basically obligated to attend and Joe's been grouching about it for weeks."

"Interesting. Would you say career advancement is important to Joe?" Hiram asked.

"Yes. Absolutely. Not the most important. But up there."

"So is he wrong to be irritated?"

"Wrong?" Amanda echoed. "No, it's just doing my head in. Alan—sorry, *Dave*—" Joe had insisted that Amanda use pseudonyms for people outside of their respective families. "—is everything we're not. We're

never gonna be. That boat has sailed. We're educated, we have a home, but the Daves and Davinas of the world we are not. We're just going to have to accept it."

"Do you think *you're* happy?"

Amanda ignored the question. "Six years we've been together. *Six years.*"

"Forgive me, but I have to ask again—you're sure he can't be persuaded to come in?"

Amanda rolled her eyes. She had broached the subject more than once already and each time Joe indicated therapy was appropriate for her because she had a pre-existing mental health condition. In contrast, he had managed to be self-sufficient whilst unmedicated for thirty-five years, he said. He claimed he was only "mental health-adjacent" because he had to care for her.

"What if you have some unhealthy behaviours of your own, but no one's ever called you out on it?" she had demanded.

"If I did," Joe had said. "It doesn't matter because, I told you, given the disaster of whatever this is between us, I don't want to be in a relationship anymore. With anyone. But you. You. Won't. Leave."

Damn right, she wouldn't. Why should she? To make things easier for him? Would he do the same?

"I'm sure," Amanda huffed to Hiram.

As Amanda pulled out of the parking lot of Hiram's office building later that day, she observed that perhaps that was the crux of her exhaustion lately. The horrible lopsidedness. She was a one-person Resistance against Joe's monolith of silence, as though his idea of pressing his case was to do nothing and watch her struggle against it, a situation for which he had, no doubt, by intention, secured the best seats in the house.

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Amanda had had no great role models in romantic relationships as a child and teenager, nor the benefit of experience as a young adult. Her parents' marriage, while more or less intact, had followed the laws of food preservation to survive through the decades, enduring from cold, salt, and desiccation. She had not dated much in school. When men told her she should smile more and that they didn't believe that she was a virgin, she walked away before they could issue an invitation to so much as queueing at a Starbucks kiosk. Joe was her first and only boyfriend, with whom she had matched through a dating app she had downloaded at sustained pressure from a co-worker, and his attention had always seemed, to her, divinely commanded.

She remembered her surprise at his spontaneous message, a rather direct invitation to drinks the next day, and her running into the next office, soliciting the help of said co-worker to arrange a time and select an alluring outfit. She remembered her thundering heartbeat when she spied him, a tall figure in jeans and a turtleneck sweater, looking up at the chalkboard menu of IPAs on tap like it were something to be puzzled out, who with his curly brown hair swooping over his eyebrows and aristocratic nose, was handsome in a way that she always assumed was above her reach. He had looked slightly weathered, the way she liked her men, like the eldest trees in the forest. He looked like the kind of man who, in his life, not for lack of access, had left a lot of proffered sex on the table.

The first name he had been born with was Robert, he told her on that first date, but he hated it and went by Joe, his middle name. He was twenty-nine and a post-doctoral researcher in the neurosurgery department of one of the teaching hospitals in the city. He was from Surrey, in England, and had one of

those Received Pronunciation accents from the BBC. It turned out his research lab was only a few streets down from the video game company in whose marketing department Amanda worked.

“Ah, proximity!” he had exclaimed.

Ah, she had thought to herself, meant to be.

He had wrung the partying and the starter relationships out of his system in his early twenties, and surprised her by, from the very first, taking care of things, the reservations, the bills, her stomach when she was hungry, her shoulders when they were cold. They soon transitioned from a lunch every second or third day to spending most nights and weekends together. When Joe’s parents came to visit from England, he introduced her proudly as his girlfriend; he invited her to his childhood home without hesitation when it was his turn to visit them. Robert Joseph Hearst’s parents and siblings, for their part, were warm in a way her own had never strived to be, making her blush with their attention. His father, Henry, went out each morning to buy a fresh baguette from the grocer’s down the block just for Amanda. They sent Amanda her own care package each Christmas and Easter, and a bigger one on her birthday, with the same things Joe missed from back home: Cadbury’s chocolate, tea from Fortnum and Mason’s, Ribenas, Hobnobs, HP’s brown sauce, half-squished packages of prawn cocktail crisps.

Amanda used to keep color-coded files about people with which she had friendships and co-workers, filling them in furiously in the days after she first met them, the vital statistics, Myers-Briggs type, their favourite beer, how they liked their eggs cooked, the details from gossip via Google and girlfriends. She told Joe, after a few weeks, she gave up on the notebook. He wanted to know what she had written about him.

“There are only a few lines,” she said, shyly.

“I don’t believe that,” he said. “Read me something from it.”

She held the file just out of his reach, sprawled in bed. He was too lazy to get up and had pillow creases on his face. His eyes held a filmy, gasoline-like gaze as she realized she was easy to toy with and how much he knew it.

“I want to know,” she repeated. “Not by the notebook. By *knowing*.”

“So know,” he said.

“I’m trying.”

“I’m an open book. You’re already reading.”

“Good. All of that is good,” she said, and leaned down to slot her mouth against his. Their teeth bumped together.

She had had some sense she and Joe were moving too quickly, but was enjoying herself too much to break out her well-worn skids, only too happy to accept, another six months later, when he proposed she move into his downtown loft.

If someone had told her then that, in a few short years, there would be regular periods when they never spoke at all, when all of the things that had made him so charming and had greased his entry into her life would cause problems which would plague them over and over, after moving to a house closer to nature—a childhood dream of his—and after adopting a dog—a childhood dream of hers—she would have collapsed to the red hardwood floor of their apartment, rolling in laughter, quoting from one of her

favourite poems: *No, no, I can hear my life like music playing itself into total exhaustion, but it's like nothing I've heard before and it will last, and last, and last.*

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Friday evening, after work, Amanda, prying open her container of Cipralex and discovering just one oval pill remaining, experienced a brief frisson of panic before she remembered Joe would be picking up her refills that day. She thought, ruefully, to an early page of her thought journal, where Amanda had listed the comforts of being in a multi-year relationship, and had included that they each had picked up certain responsibilities on which the other could rely. Amanda did the dishes; Joe did the laundry. He did not mind dragging the vacuum from room to room; she monitored the joint bank account for suspicious activity. She could not be sure without asking, but she assumed that for these things they were mutually grateful.

He had a particular system for the refills: he wrote an automated script which would SMS, WhatsApp, and email himself on all his devices three, two, and one day in advance. He took over early on in their relationship, after witnessing her near-breakdown at the prospect of phoning the doctor's office when she ran low. At that time, they still lived in separate apartments in town; when she did not respond to his texts for a few days, he dropped by her apartment, where he found her holed up in the corner with all the shades drawn, drinking Soylent and getting up to pee the minimum amount. A time when his propping her up at the tram stop after nearly OD-ing seemed romantic. When most twenty-something men hastened from feeling needed, she recognized his delight in seeing himself in a new way. He had, in college, discovered a distaste for those who did not appear to care.

Standing at the sink, Amanda filled herself a tall glass of water and observed the tiny bubbles and sediment inside. She rolled the pill between her palms. She heard the soft click of nails on tile and turned around. Lucy had emerged from a nap in her crate and her ears stiffened as she was wont to do when she wanted food.

"Hello, silly," Amanda said. She had Lucy sit while she grabbed a package of dehydrated duck tenders from above the fridge and broke them into small pieces, which she held out, one at a time, on her palm to the patient animal.

Lucy's tongue was warm, wet, and sandpapery. She seemed oblivious and secure in her place in the home and hearth. Amanda absently scratched her behind her ears. Following the email fiasco, Amanda and Joe had made no progress in the argument, and instead of stalling on the same obstacles, they agreed on a temporary *détente* so they could each get some work done. It suited Amanda just fine. It suited Lucy as well.

Half an hour later, she heard Joe's sedan pull into the driveway and the clomp of his boots up the walk, their undersides grating against the straw mat covering the doorstep. She was slicing onions on a cutting board beneath the range hood and running the fan to avoid her eyes watering, though this measure was only partway successful.

Coming up behind her, he deposited the white paper bag with her refills. She glanced over, called out a perfunctory hello. He disappeared into their bedroom.

"Good day at work?" she asked, but received no answer.

Amanda shut the fan off and made to follow him down the hall. Yet she had only taken a few steps before he re-emerged. For a split second they locked eyes; then she glanced towards the arm at his side, which carried a set of sheets and a fleece blanket.

He looked beyond her to the living room, at the sectional which was pulled out, its cushions already neatly stacked next to the radiators. His lips were flattened. Her throat tightened like a vise, but she would not let him see her perturbed, so she forced her cheeks to relax and straightened her shoulders into a half-shrug.

Back at the sink, she pretended to concentrate again on the onions while pressing a thumb to the pulse in her wrist. She didn't say another word. Somehow, she got through the performative aspect of the onions, caramelized them, and spread them over pasta before she set their places at the table with particular, almost assiduous care.

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After Lucy came to them, the changes they had hoped for came one after the other swift, compliant, and convenient. Neither having been permitted a pet when growing up, Amanda's parents allergic and Joe's preferring to keep fish, they stopped their bickering, the new furry arrival giving over a freshness to everything. Neither of them expected it. Neither of them knew quite what to do except to roll on with it and the way it seemed to be working to save everything that needed to be saved. To touch it would be to disturb its spiderweb-like fragility. To be responsible for that was something Amanda could not sustain. Better that Joe comment or neither at all, and so she accepted it as the gratis gift that it seemed to be.

The most immediate consequences were financial, an open season on both their credit cards, when they giddily scrolled Amazon's bottomless offerings, choosing toys, blankets, dishes, leashes, brushes, creams, one-hundred percent natural paw protectant with beeswax, grapeseed oil, and shea butter. No sooner had one package arrived than one of them remembered something else Lucy couldn't do without and began filling a new virtual cart. Flattened shipping boxes cluttered their driveway on recycling day and Lucy's toys took up more space in her room than Lucy herself. They spoiled her rotten with treats, hikes, and playtime every day. They luxuriated, in between the adventures, in their continued education, on one week raw diets, another dog-proofing in the home, Amanda watching Youtube videos on protecting cables from razor-sharp incisors while, one by one, Joe sorted the houseplants based on risk of toxicity to canines.

Alongside their home their bodies and minds changed. With the walks and runs they now did three times a day, Amanda lost two dress sizes and Joe saw his toes re-emerge from beneath his belly-bulge when he looked down in the shower. Their confidence grew; they laughed, gestured more expansively. Old things became new when done with Lucy. She couldn't go inside the shops and restaurants, but they walked her, in town, all around the venues of their early dates and reminded each other of a park bench here, a lookout there.

They began to have sex again, and Joe even went down on Amanda, gripping her wrists as he did so, so heavily that it dug into the old scars, only now beginning to turn shiny and grey, and made her gasp. He heard her but didn't stop. Digging, like Lucy did when she found evidence of an old abandoned rabbit hole, a mole or groundhog, something alive, once there and gone.

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That night, after Joe had gone to bed on the sofa, Amanda slipped back into the dream, as into old bathwater.

She had suspected, since the night of Doctor Squared's godforsaken celebration, that no hour was truly safe from what was now a familiar and fruitless search for Lucy. Much to her growing sense of trepidation, Amanda had experienced two more instances of the disturbance in the daytime when walking her, in addition to those at night, which continued to fragment her sleep. Even worse, she had begun to shout

during the dreams, waking herself and Joe, until he took to wearing earplugs and running a white noise app on his phone.

She monitored her medication, food, and drink tightly, but nothing seemed to help. If she accepted, as Hiram seemed to, the lack of organic cause—what else could there be? When she searched for Lucy, the useless leash wound around her wrist, she was certain something sinister lurked in the murk. Was she meant to search for it? Perhaps it did not matter when, each time, as though led, she was drawn inexorably forward, towards the sound of Lucy's bark, which became a howl and whimper, through grasses, vines, brambles of obdurate strength and texture, which yielded only their brethren no matter how much she stomped and hacked at them.

Awake, Amanda lay for several seconds beneath the covers, blinking at the ceiling, and waited until she was certain she was in her own room. She cast out a palm across the cold sheet before she remembered Joe slept on the sofa. She lifted her head, and through the open door she heard Joe's gentle snores from the hallway.

As Amanda placed her feet on the floor, Lucy stretched her jaws wide, and out of the darkness a pair of shining eyes, pale green and fluorescent, rested on her kindly. Lucy's snout making a reedy whistling noise from her round dog bed.

Poor, sweet thing, Amanda thought. Lucy had no particular spot where she slept regularly—she did as she pleased—and on this day must have divined that one master needed her more than the other.

In her slippers she padded to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, the liquid a cool rope in her throat, stifling a barely embered anger constantly re-lighting itself against the cavity of her belly.

Amanda steadied the arm straight in front of her and examined them; her close-clipped nails were shiny and lavender, the cuticles gnawed to the quick, the ragged skin around them sluggishly growing back. She felt herself weakening. Joe continued to snore. How could she keep him in a relationship he no longer identified with?

Despair—that was the word. All she could conclude was that he had developed such a prowess at assuming the imitation of love. And if so, what if these motions, hers, were the imitation of despair?

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"Your boyfriend's here to visit," the internal medicine hospitalist, Dr. Mayer, had said when she woke up from the OD, five years before.

She had tried to kill himself with twenty clonazepam, Dr. Mayer said. They found her in the woods, looking for a place to die. She did not remember a thing when she woke up in hospital. She was nauseated and crawled to the bathroom to vomit. She knew it had not been his fault, not because of an argument—just the way she always was, that trampoline-like malaise that had dogged her since she was small.

Joe, her nurse said, had been trying to call her for two days. They would not let him visit until she woke up. At that time, they'd only been living together for a few months. She called him from the phone at the nursing station and said everything was okay.

"I'm coming," he said.

She wanted to say, "What's the point?" but ended with, "Okay." She had known he would eventually see the mess he had gotten himself into, but had delayed it over and over again when its train of thought tried to screech into the station.

When Amanda was sitting up, talking, and voiding, which she learned was the medical term for peeing and pooing, the doctors had cleared her to walk around the small exercise pen at the rear of the hospital. It was there that she asked Joe to answer a question she had been tossing around in her mind, as a sort of game to play in order to avoid talking again over the same story, what it had been like in the woods, her lack of note, her last thoughts, how she could do this do him, to herself.

"Tell me a deep dark secret about yourself," she said.

"What?" he said.

"Mine," she said, "is that I'm suicidal."

Soberly, he had given her a small smile.

"Haha," she said, fake laughing.

He had said that that was normal, the brain made strange associations, he wouldn't begrudge her that. He thought she was brave for fighting them off. He imagined that it was much more common than people admitted. Even he had imagined for a split second standing on the subway platform losing one's balance and falling into the path of the coming train.

Oh, she remembered thinking. Even you. Perfect as you are with your Received Pronunciation accent, posh family, and quiet competency.

"Your turn," she said instead.

Joe had thought for a long time before answering, they made three complete circuits of the garden before he made up his mind, looking like it pained him to recall the incident, the effort overcoming him.

"I once chased a girl to the Continent," he said in a voice so soft she knew it was true. "She had gone for study abroad to Denmark and found someone she liked better. I went nuts and got on the first plane with just a duffle and not a single Euro in my pocket, not even for a cab or sandwich. I thought that was what she wanted, you know. The dumb chasing a girl through airport security kind of thing in the movies."

"Is that supposed to be the dark part?" she asked.

"The dark part," he said. "At least what made me feel dark, later, on the plane ride back, after the most awkward week of my life, was how much I regretted it. I showed up at the place she was staying and she let me crash there. But we barely spoke, I knew it was over, and I didn't even take a single photo or go to a museum, feeling like I was supposed to endure it for my edification or something."

She waited.

"So, I swore to myself I'd never chase another girl again, not to Denmark, not to the supermarket, nowhere. Chasing was for idiots with euros and vacation days to spare."

"You win," she said instantly and felt an unforeseen giggle escape her throat.

"What?"

“You’re right. That’s fucking dark. Never ever? I feel offended for all your future partners. One of them could be kidnapped by the yakuza or something and you’re just going to be chilling.”

“It’s so dark you’re laughing,” he said, but cracked a smile too.

She gripped his elbow and leaned on him. They looked up at the brutalist architecture of the hospital, whose psychiatry wing jutted out of one side like an isthmus, the small slit windows looking like medieval embrasures. But even if arrows flew in from all directions and shot her dead at that moment, she thought it would have been a fine way to go.

“What can I say. I’m dark,” she said. Then, “Fucking Denmark, huh?”

“Fucking Denmark,” he agreed.

“Dark,” she said again.

“I know,” he said. “I guess so am I, when it comes down to it.”

“Is that bad? Should we change?” she joked. “Maybe we should get some new hobbies. Or a dog.”

“A dog,” he said. “Now there’s a fine idea.”

And she knew that he meant it.

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As always, Joe’s sulk, a constant flirtation with theatrics, did not last. Quietly, he was back in the bed the next day, after brushing his teeth, reading a thick tome. Amanda stared at the contours of his sleeping face after his breaths turned shallow and steady, and tried not to think about the dreams. They trespassed again and again.

Gullies of shadow horseshoed her eyes. Her boss had noticed from the beginning and urged her to use some vacation days. But Amanda and Joe had discovered long ago that work and routine formed the most effective bulwarks against her depression.

“Have you noticed anything different about Lucy lately?” Amanda asked in the morning, as she sat on her knees, peering into the opening of Lucy’s crate. It was the fifth day of the visions, and after so little sleep, her edginess finally induced her to test the waters of discussion. Joe was in a good mood, dusting his figurines, a model Aragorn and Geralt of Rivia, on the sideboard. They tidied the house every Sunday before Joe had his karate class as a rule.

“What are you saying? A hot spot?” Joe asked. Occasionally, Lucy turned up with a dime or nickel-sized bald area on her flank, usually from allergies or dry skin. She tended to lick and lick at the spot, retarding its healing, but eventually, and sometimes with the aid of a cone of shame, the spot would not linger.

He came around the other side, poked his head in and observed the fur, using the torch function on his phone. A slight sheen of perspiration covered his reddish nose. In response to having her paws manipulated, Lucy released a disapproving growl. Sometimes to put on her winter boots or to clip her nails they distracted her using bits of cheese curds for treats, making each job a two-person affair.

“No, don’t see one. Maybe she’s lost a bit of weight.”

“That or...” Amanda trailed off. “I don’t know.” She and Joe still split the walks; she supposed if there was some strange behaviour he would have brought it up.

Lucy turned her brown eyes, wide and unassuming on Amanda, through the mesh covering a window of sorts at the side of the crate.

“You want me to take her by Dr. Ryan’s?” Joe asked. He was still examining the soft gummy pads of Lucy’s feet, turning them over one at a time.

Did she? Amanda, before she could stop herself, wrinkled her nose. She imagined explaining the visions to a vet while Lucy munched on a complimentary dog biscuit.

“No,” she said. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“You sure?” When she did not say anything, he looked concerned, a line appearing between his soot-like eyebrows. “Sounds like something.”

“I’m sure.”

“How’s this. I’ll keep an eye on her. If I notice anything, I’ll bring her in. She’s supposed to have a shot in two months anyway, so we can ask questions then too. Sound good?”

Amanda had forgotten. “That’s right,” she said to herself.

“I wrote it on the fridge,” Joe said, reading her mind. Then he nudged her shoulder.

She almost reared back, startled at the sudden affection.

“Sound good?” he repeated. Joe picked up his duster, which he left on the sideboard, and returned to his figurines. They gleamed silver, menacing and silent, in the afternoon light.

“Sounds good,” she said.

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Doctor Squared certainly knew how to throw a bash. Not content with the save the date card, he created an entire website for the housewarming, including photographs of their house at various phases of the construction, full directions and map, and an online questionnaire regarding significant others, children, and dietary restrictions. He stated explicitly “the more, the merrier.” He said he’d update the menu on the website in a few hours as he was still arguing with the caterers.

Upon opening the link on Monday morning at work, Joe promptly forwarded the missive to Amanda, who was still doing the mental math on the approximate number of attendees when her phone lit up with his name. One of the larger groups at the university, Joe’s lab had over thirty members; when the medical co-residents, collaborators, attendings and their families were added, the final headcount could hover at close to two hundred. Joe sounded as if his anger prevented him from holding the phone still.

She whistled. “Jesus. Where does he live, West Egg?”

“What do you think we should bring?” Joe asked. “And since Sophia’s making the big bucks now, they’ve got one of those godawful McMansions off the freeway.”

Amanda pursed her lips. Doctor Squared's long-time partner, a rising star in the hospital, had recently made attending in obstetrics. She vaguely recalled earlier diatribes from Joe on the subject of the home to be warmed, that when Alan and Sophia had not found a property to their satisfaction in town, they had hired a team to build their dream home on an empty patch of land large enough for their ambitions. Personally, Amanda liked the idea of living farther from town, but Joe had always needed a crowd. He relished and powered himself by the frenetic movement of others.

She rubbed at her temple, slowly, in circles. "Fuckers," she said, primarily for his benefit. "I've got that set of pillar candles from your aunt we can pass on."

"We should bring a dish too," Joe said, ignoring her comment.

"Why? Isn't he taking care of it?"

"I don't trust that guy. It could be inedible. Can you make the...you know."

She heard him snapping his fingers on the phone. She could always picture his little peculiar movements. "Quiche?" she asked.

"Yes. Exactly. Quiche. I'll feel better knowing we have that."

A few hours later, as promised, the menu for the housewarming was published: crudités, crab cakes, French onion soup, duck, and haddock. There would be a case of champagne, and samosas from an Indian restaurant in Hartford, and big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels. There would be vegetarian, vegan, and halal options to signal the hosts' wokeness. Via another email, Alan reminded everyone that childcare was available in one wing of his basement, presided over by three highly-trained graduate students in the Early Childhood Studies department.

Amanda clicked through the various pages once and swore. Shouldn't they just bring a bottle of wine? Perhaps the candles were sufficient? But Joe had passed judgment that preparation was to be their watchword. They shouldn't fight over this too.

So she went out and bought the ingredients, pushing the cart on squeaky wheels through the dairy and refrigerated sections of the supermarket, perusing the other parts of the website she had previously skipped over. At least they were spared a section of "how we met" and a photo gallery.

With one hand holding a bottle of olive oil, she paused on the tab for "how to get here." It showed a map and directions for how to get to the property. When she tried to go on Google Maps, Streetview was not available.

Not available, she thought, as another frisson of coldness passed through her. The last time, she had used Google Maps was her run a month before. She wasn't a customary runner; a swimmer usually. But for some reason, that day, she had. She loaded a playlist of medieval art history podcasts, an interest from university recently rekindled, into her phone, which she slotted into an armband encircling her left bicep. She paired the device to a set of Bluetooth earbuds. From where their stone driveway met the front walk, she made a right turn past the neighbours' mustard bungalow and two-car garage, and at a bank of metal mailboxes swerved right once more onto a path connecting their street to the grounds of a primary school, a lush jungle of foursquare courts, roundabouts, climbers, swings, and slides. She used to jog past it and perform certain assumptions, namely if she and Joe ever had a child while they lived here, he or she would attend that school.

Half an hour later, Amanda stepped back across the threshold into the foyer. She toed off her trainers. She thought Joe was still asleep until, popping out her earbuds, she stopped the podcast, an episode on chiaroscuro, and heard his voice from the kitchen plus an older, deeper, very familiar one answering.

“Is that Henry?” she called.

Joe’s father was a barrister in Surrey, close to retirement. His parents and sometimes his elder sister and brother and their children tended to call on certain scheduled days when they were all free and could make an event of it and they would do a little bit of apero over webcam. She tossed her socks into a half-full laundry basket at the foot of the stairs. By the time she entered the kitchen, however, just a few seconds later Joe was shutting the lid of his laptop and pushing his chair into the table. She detached the Velcro fasteners on the armband.

“Are you leaving?” she asked.

“A paper I need to read,” Joe said. He ducked past her, quickly. Too quickly.

“Alright,” Amanda said, forcing herself not to yank at his arm and increasing the volume of her speech instead. “Hey, have you thought about what we should get your parents for Christmas?”

“No.”

“I was thinking maybe a wine aerator and an upgraded Kindle.” She paused, waiting for his answer. “Joe?”

“What?” He was halfway up the stairs already, but his voice carried.

She followed and stood at the base of the stairs, gripping the railing and looking at her hand. “Did you say anything to them about...us?”

“Why would I?” he asked.

“Why would you?” she echoed. A sudden anger elevated inside her. “Because you’re apparently Skyping them in secret like a marauder?” She didn’t know why she used the word marauder; it just came out. A part of her knew she needed to be, like Hiram was always saying, using *I* statements, not *you* statements, it was not *her versus him*, it was *them versus the problem*. And yet.

“You think I want them to know about your crazy?” Joe, now holding a sheaf of papers in his hand, stood in the doorway of his office, his hard gaze seeming to fix on a spot above her head.

She stared at him.

“Sorry,” he said perfunctorily.

“No, by all means, tell me how you really feel.” She let her arm fall to her side, but when it found nothing to do there, she tucked it in her pocket.

He glowered and said, “If you want to talk to Mum and Dad, you have their number. If you’re worried about consistency, I can assure you their memories aren’t good enough for that to be a problem. Can I read now?” And he had turned around and disappeared into the office.

Read this, she had thought. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do.

Back in the grocery store, feeling slightly dizzy, Amanda put down the bottle of olive oil back on the shelf and slowly walked to the checkout. She wished she could talk to Henry, actually, she really did. If he would even know what to say or if he knew his son at all or had the baguettes and care packages all been for show like everything else.

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Finally, the day of the party arrived.

Amanda, working on the quiche mix with a wooden spoon and a giant melamine bowl in the kitchen, felt, once again, the superfluity of her efforts. She didn't like to do cheesy dishes. Her quiche was fine, but nothing special, in her opinion. It was not as if Joe didn't know how to cook; he had simply assigned her to do this because he was too busy being angry with Alan to take an iota of responsibility for this party. She had given Lucy her food and the dog dozed on the bed, curled in a donut and looking slightly sleepy—Lucy, who never made a fuss when they left, if fed.

Meanwhile, Joe, standing in the foyer, already clad in a long charcoal duster coat, dismissed the email from his screen with a flick of his thumb. Ducking into the kitchen, he cast an appraising eye over the quiche mix; he said he might go to the basement and watch a few episodes of *The Office* before it was time to go.

"Aren't you warm?" she asked.

Joe, shaking his head, picked up a plastic bag by the door and held it out to her. "I forgot. From the undergrads." He rustled the bag. "It's Tanqueray," he said helpfully.

As she accepted the bottle, he pulled off the attached card with a reindeer and blinking lights and chucked it on a table. Amanda shook her head. She kept on forgetting how close it was getting to the holidays. She turned and walked to the dining room. Unlike the other doors in the house, the passage between the kitchen and the dining room featured a sliding panel, and because of the difficulty in getting a good grip, they kept it permanently in the open position. Amanda padded in her slippers around the broad leaflets of the maple table she had acquired, in a great deal, at an estate sale, careful not to bump her thighs against the corner. They kept all their alcohol in a redwood cabinet originally meant for china, since they had too much of the former and not enough of the latter.

"Hey."

She started when she heard his voice, and realized Joe had followed her into the dining room. She turned around.

He leaned against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets, and in a dormant act of muscle memory, her shoulders relaxed. The skin on his neck below his beard had faded to its hoary winter colour. He had put on tie, then taken it off again, a motion she had observed without comment, reminding herself what experience had taught her, to permit him to go through the eccentricities of his orbit, including trying not to look he was trying too hard. There was an unconscious curve of his mouth. He looked as if he were waiting.

She centered the bottle perfectly between a French port and Riesling ice wine, and shut the cabinet door with a click. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"Could you do something for me," he said gently.

Her heart began to pound. On the day he had brought her to the Emergency Department the most recent time, a year before, he had used the very same words, saying them in the same delicate way, pulling back the bedroom curtain to admit a paring of light onto her face, which had not seen the sun in days. She had been touched by the care he took as he dressed her, locating a sock she had kicked beneath the bed in a rage. She had not seen him slip into a backpack her private notebook, the notebook where she had written detailed fantasies of ending her life, the notebook that he would later pass to the admitting resident, behind her back.

Perhaps, then, this was it, the final sundering, as Hiram had termed. The thing she claimed would never happen. Joe had overtaken, somehow, an invisible tolerance. The tone was different from his usual prickliness, however, as if this were something considered. Idly, she wondered if he had already rented an apartment close to work, secretly, without telling her. Which of the streets they so often walked and drove was it on and could she even see it from their house? Or would he doze in his office next to the lab inside a sleeping bag like some of young Assistant Professors did while they gunned gangrenously for tenure?

There would be no more stomping to the sectional, fussing with the fitted sheet, which he never knew how to fold properly in the morning. She balanced on the edge of relief and consternation. And the recognition caused prickles of frost to frame the filaments of her nerve endings.

“About Christmas,” he said. He was facing her straight on with his body, yet his face tilted towards the chandelier. “I’ve been thinking. I think it’s better if I went alone.”

Her brain worked to catch up with this series of statements.

“Wouldn’t you agree?”

Christmas, she thought. Henry. That day. The run. His evasiveness. “Oh.”

He pushed on. “I’ve told my parents that you used up all your vacation earlier in the year.” His voice was strange, like curdled milk, and now he paced back and forth in front of the coffee table, keeping his gaze on the glass dish at its center where there were three fake Anjou pears.

“I did?”

“And you want to keep an eye on Lucy this time since she hasn’t been feeling well.”

“She hasn’t?” Amanda asked.

He only looked irritated. “That’s what you said. You said she looked thin.”

“Right,” she said. She blinked. “Wait, did you even talk to Dr. Ryan?”

“You said she didn’t look right,” he said again, ignoring the question.

“Okay.” Amanda placed a hand over her collarbones, as if setting them in place. The slick, oily words kept sliding past her as though she wore a wetsuit.

“Mum and Dad seemed to understand. Maybe you could come next year,” he said, as though offering a half-gnawed bone to Lucy. Joe shifted.

They looked at each other without speaking for a moment. The light slanted in from the window, a southern exposure, muted by nylon shades. The light at Joe’s parents’ two-story English cottage in

Surrey was the same. It had been used as a boarding house for children evacuated to the countryside in World War Two and some of the architectural features and hedgerows were still intact.

“The tickets,” she pointed out. She had watched him purchase them back in June.

“I already called the airline,” he said. “I’ll have to pay a penalty for cancellation, but that’s fine. I’ve got it. And some can be credited to another flight.”

She was silent. He dropped his gaze to his hands, but she continued to stare. It was obvious that he had run through the lines. All this time she had been thinking she had caught him—those thoughts about the keystone—no, he had been preparing for something; when she thought she had had him by the wrist, it had only been the sleeve of something, his arm long drawn back towards the shoulder. It sickened Amanda, knowing that he had spent these past weeks preparing for a life without her. She was relieved and yet he was sickened. Joe and Henry and his mum and his brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews were all in this together, perhaps, the call that most properly wasn’t one call, but one of many, softening the blow to them. There would be no grandchildren for a while. They knew. They knew. They knew.

“Where did I go?” she asked, finally.

“What?” he asked.

“For vacation. They might ask. And I’d like to know too.”

He looked exasperated, a crease forming above his forehead. He threw up his hands. “What kind of question is that?”

“Where did I go?” she repeated.

“Spain,” he said. “Barcelona.”

“For three weeks?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

“Sorry.”

“You did the whole circuit. Madrid. Seville. You went to Santiago de Compostela. You found God.”

Then he turned and quietly headed for the basement. Amanda reached forwards and, with a clawed hand, gripped the corner of the table until the lack of blood left her fingertips white.

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One hour later, they both stood at the foot of the main staircase.

“You ready?” he asked.

She had chosen her outfit with care to match his shirt, a slim-fitting knee-length dress the colour of oyster shell. It was a Jackie O kind of dress. But it felt restrictive, like she had gained chub in her shoulders and armpits. She tugged at it, smoothed the fabric over her breasts. She wished she had chosen something from her younger days, with thin straps and a plunging neckline. But they had to leave.

She nodded. "Hold the door," she said, and ducked under his arm with the quiche clutched protectively to her belly.

Joe didn't get his driver's license until he was twenty-five, and failed the road test the first time, a fact he made her promise never to disclose to anyone. He drove tentatively when they met and still did now, in the green sedan that was "his," his fingers at eleven and two o'clock on the wheel tapping nervously to an inaudible beat. He drove smack-dab in the middle of every speed range, while they moved from the quiet university streets to wider arteries to the onramp of the freeway.

The heater blasted hot air in Amanda's face. She adjusted the vents on the dashboard, aiming them at her feet instead. The warm bottom of the quiche pan pressed against her bare thighs where her dress rode up.

As they flew past exits, she looked through the passenger side window, past the three other lanes and into the dark squiggle of conifers beyond, almost the same squid-ink colour of the sky. The sun disappeared so early these days they turned on the Christmas tree lights at three in the afternoon, and on the television, they ran a program which projected a virtual fireplace, complete with crackling noises, onto the screen. At times she swore she actually felt its warmth and had placed a rug at the foot of the TV stand to be close to it. The thought struck her as particularly inviting now. They rarely went this way—they conducted their lives within a three-mile radius of the university—and the wildness was as alien to her as another planet. A break in the trees and a small lake flashed by, the width of her hands put together, she thought, were she to spread them against the glass.

She imagined the life, both resting and active, so near and hidden, small crepuscular animals, toadstools, mosses, and skittering insects. A David Attenborough-ish narration.

Joe leaned to the side and consulted the GPS. "Next exit," he said.

"There," she said.

"Where?"

She pointed to the sign and he changed lanes. The sharp curve of the ramp pushed her against the side door and the handle dug into her forearm.

At the bottom, Joe swore. They turned right after a stop sign and continued down a two-lane road, not paved quite so well.

Amanda sat up. "What's wrong?"

"GPS doesn't seem to have accurate map of this road. It might be too new."

"Here. We'll just use his website." She clipped her phone into a gooseneck device attached to the dash. "What road is this again?"

"Glenforest."

"Got it. We're still a ways away. Stay on this road and take a left at the next intersection. There should be a gas station."

She squinted at the screen and adjusted the brightness down until the landscape through the windshield resolved once more into discrete shapes. They were the only car on the road in either direction. The

streetlamps looked like limp spermatozoa. The road was set at a slight declivity and wound back and forth.

She kept one hand gripping the quiche. It would be slow going. A white sign, showing a speed limit of thirty, flashed by. She wished she were not still thinking of...fucking Barcelona, Madrid, Seville, and Santiago de Compostela.

She looked at Joe's profile, the weathered curl of his beard, after a month's growth. He was more handsome than ever. She remembered what it was like to kiss him for the first time. And could not remember the last time they kissed. How aware she was, always, of thinking of him.

She saw, at first, far ahead, a large bush at the edge of the guardrail, and stiffened. A bush which resolved into something alive. A reddish, roan shape, covered in fur, much larger than a squirrel. Then a full feathery tail held aloft.

She abandoned the thought of the Glenforest sign entirely.

She let go of the quiche. She tried to undo her seatbelt, but pulled too quickly, and it locked.

"Stop. Stop the car," she said.

"What?"

"Now." And she put an iron grip on the wheel.

Startled, Joe wrenched it to the side and they came to a skidding stop on the gravel shoulder. "Jesus, Amanda. What in the—"

At the same time, the headlight picked up the shape, in one full movement, tensing its limbs, springing forward. The shape, dashing across the two lanes of traffic, disappeared beneath the guardrail, through the grasses on the other side.

Heart in her throat, bunching her coat around her, she stepped out of the car. Her heeled boots struck the gravel with the noise of flint, and she nearly stumbled into a wooden post. She whipped around, one way, then the other, as though the shape might appear again.

She reached out a hand to touch the hood of the car. A mechanical whirring accompanied the lowering of Joe's window. He knocked sharply against the windshield. He signed madly, though she could hear him just fine.

"It's freezing. Get back in the car," he said.

Amanda collected her breath. It wasn't possible. A series of other potentials came to her: white-tailed deer, coyotes, red fox, black and red squirrels, raccoon, porcupine, mink, muskrat, beaver, mice, voles, shrews, weasels. Yet she would know those urajiro markings anywhere. She had shut the bedroom door and the door to the den, entrusting Lucy to her favourite toys and a full bowl of water. Joe had stolen in just before; with a pocket knife, he cut off some rind from a wheel of gouda and left pieces in various spots of the room, a game.

They had left Lucy there, and here Lucy was, at last, in front of her.

Her limbs impelled of their own accord, Amanda started across the road, ignoring Joe flickering the lights. She wanted to shout at him, to stop with his beleaguered Morse. Instead, she looked away.

At the base of the guardrail, grasses hid the soggy ground. Perhaps her boots, tender suede, would be ruined. At another moment, she would have assumed the sensation of loss, but the thought then came and went, as Hiram used to beg her to try. Awareness, not judgement, he said.

Wishing she had a torch, she remembered again her phone. Soon its cool LED beam fanned over the path ahead. Damp branches scrubbed her shins then her thighs.

She had some sense of what awaited her.

This was her dream again. This time, she did not run.

“Hello, Luce,” she said quietly.

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When she emerged from the trees, Joe said, “Thank god, what the fuck.” Joe stood against the side of the car, furiously rubbing his hands together and blowing into them. He looked like an actor; people really didn’t do those things, she thought. It was like blowing on an ice cube.

She took a few steps towards him and reached for the handle of the door. She paused.

“What,” he said. He was already back inside and readjusting the rearview mirror. He checked his hair.

“Joe,” she said.

“Get in,” he said absently, still combing his fingers through his hair.

“Joe,” she repeated. “I’m not going with you.”

He turned around.

“I’m going to get the bus,” she said. She looked up suddenly, at the dimmed stars among shirred clouds. Slightly pale green and fluorescent like Lucy’s eyes that time in the middle of the night. “It’s fine. Please go on.”

“What?”

She realized he could not hear her as well with the door between them and motioned for him to press the button so the glass of the window slid down partially.

“They’re waiting for you, Joe.”

“That’s the point. Everyone’s waiting. Get in the car.” He looked bewildered.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? Get in the fucking car. Where did you put the quiche? It’s going to get cold.”

“It’s already cold,” she said. She held out her hand to touch the glass, the fingers curling over the edge slightly, while, simultaneously, taking a step backwards. Her heel wobbled on the asphalt. “I’m going to get the bus.”

“What bus?” he said. “There is no bus.”

“I’m going to walk.”

“Amanda,” he said. “Amanda.”

“I’m going back to my dog,” she said. And she pulled her coat around her and started walking away from the car while he called her name, and then stopped.

For a moment, all she heard was silence. Swearing. The shuffling of maps. The glove compartment slamming shut. He was looking for the quiche, he must be. Then, the start of the car, and the pale circle of the headlights slowly moving away, briefly illuminating the wire hanger skeletons of the trees.

Everything was starting to crackle, she could sense a feverish vibration under the grass, under the layers of earth, as if vast, underground nerves, sullen with effort, were just about to burst. She was finding it hard to rid herself of the feeling that under it all lurked a strong, mindless will, as primitive as the force that made the frogs climb on top of each other and endlessly copulate in the pond.

She could feel Lucy, walking ahead of her.

She took a deep breath. She could feel Lucy walking behind her.

Behind or ahead, it didn’t matter. She felt her. They were going to be fine. They were going on a walk.

END