

Missing Poster for a Closet Safe

by Keeley Young

At 8:32, I wandered off home in the dark, illuminated infrequently by the screen of my phone. Streetlamps are a bit outdated around here. There is a smattering of them, two streets away from work, which haven't been operational for almost a year. In the gloom, I could hide, although, too, in the gloom, I could be murdered. I left work, heaving underneath the weight of the backpack—at this point, I was still carrying Joe's books, the handful he leant to me when we met on the half-hour lunch break I got that day. Joe is a friend from university. We typically spend a week or so together each summer vacationing... somewhere. The books would have to be my weight, I'd thought. Pressure on my shoulders.'

'I know it isn't necessarily an alibi that can be corroborated,' I continued, sliding in the term *alibi* to make myself seem more adjacent to the conversation. In front of me, sitting almost comfortably in a leather armchair, was a plainclothes police officer. He insisted, given the apparel, I refer to him as Matthew. He was likely five or so years older than I was, with a military-style buzz cut and a toothy smile. I was being interrogated about the disappearance of my downstairs neighbour's closet safe.

'Who would have seen you leaving work at 8:32?' he asked, shifting slightly. Instead of the kitchen table, which I had covered with a tablecloth, a ring of tealight candles, and Joe's books, we had taken the conversation to the living room. It was a cramped space—the apartment prioritised room in the bedrooms, of which there were two—so the atmosphere felt almost police-procedural. Matthew, however, was affable enough to talk to.

I combed my brain for the names. 'I said goodnight to Carmen before she climbed into the driver's seat of her car,' I replied, resisting the urge to move at all. 'There are only a few of us who close the shop at that point. Carmen, myself, and the relatively-new hire, a nineteen-year-old kid called Terry. I remember being surprised a kid who looked so young could be called Terry.'

Matthew side-stepped the commentary and returned to facts. 'I'm sure I can get in contact with Carmen and Terry both to corroborate,' he said, void of any certain emotion. 'How long does the walk take?'

This I had to an estimation. A true-enough estimation, from the three years I had walked to and from my apartment for the job. 'About twenty minutes,' I replied, hoping my lack of hesitation would gain me further favour with the police officer. He didn't seem to be hounding me. This was all routine, I reminded myself, taking a quick glance at his hand on the page, taking notes.

'Twenty minutes exact?'

'Around about. Can take longer if the traffic is horrendous,' I said, to which he briefly cocked his head in faint confusion. Then he understood, readjusting himself.

'You position, then, that you would arrive back at the apartment building at around 8:50pm last night. Fifteen minutes after your neighbour, Mr Fleisher, recounts the burglary must have taken place.'

‘That is correct,’ and I paused, hesitating to call him the given first name. Matthew. Perhaps I would have preferred a title and a last name. He seems less a friend, but not an adversary either. A stranger in my home, busying me with thoughts and questions.

Matthew finishes writing a bullet point in his grey notepad and looks up at me. ‘You understand we have to consider the residents in the building. The lock was undamaged in Mr Fleisher’s apartment, which implies to an extent that someone he knew smuggled it out with them.’ I nodded. It made no sense to me why the police officer Matthew came alone, out of uniform, willing to share these elements and facts of the case with me. I had to assume it was common knowledge in the building—many people passed by his apartment when they headed down the stairs to leave. People, then, would have noticed nothing out of the ordinary. I shifted my attention, to why Matthew came to me in two different narratives. Where one represents his duty, the other a sense of kindness, certainly a softness towards strangers.

‘How well do you know Mr Fleisher?’ I wanted instead to ask him what he was doing in my apartment wearing what I could consider his Saturday-in-the-park clothes. A green polo with a miniature stitched-on white horse on the right-hand side. Beige slacks. How well do I know my downstairs neighbour? A man in his late forties to early fifties, I presumed—you weren’t supposed to ask older folks their ages, and in the time I spent in Mr Fleisher’s apartment, he never once confirmed or denied the ‘shape of his earthly being, in span’. This was something he was likely to mutter. There were choice phrases of his I’d picked up over the three years I have been his upstairs neighbour. An intelligent man, although rather plain to look at. Complete head of hair.

I considered how to speak as to not sound like my neighbour had died instead. I was drawing blanks, becoming somewhat nervous I would take too long to answer his question. Mr Fleisher... ‘If I went to his door asking for something, an egg, a cup of flour, you know, I think he would oblige me, although we aren’t majorly close.’ I paused, attempting a smile, as to hint, *but I hold no ill will against him*. ‘He likes hosting dinner parties for the neighbours, he can be quite boastful about his cooking ability, and the entertainer past we might not have expected when we first met him.’ I told the officer about the one or two occasions where he surprised us with a murder mystery party instead. He had arranged for himself to be faked-murdered at the dining table or in the parlour, which is what he pretended the living room to be. One of our other neighbours, one half of an unassuming couple, shook from the shock and splashed her drink down the front of her shirt. While she excused herself to the bathroom and towelled off, Mr Fleisher reanimated and told us the truth—one among us was the murderer. I was but a lowly thespian, invited to attend this soiree off the heels of a thrilling performance in a stage production with an all-male cast. Not the murderer, no.

‘I think once upon a time you would be more familiar with all your neighbours, but some of them I only wave to when we’re both coming home, or putting out our trash.’ This response seemed to appease Matthew the cop. He nodded, taking note.

‘And you knew about the closet safe?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

He paused. This he somehow noted with a single stroke, almost as if crossing my name from his list. That is what I hoped. To be cleared from the suspects list. The last thing I would have dreamed of doing last night was inviting myself over to Mr Fleisher’s apartment and enduring a number of his anecdotal stories. Or attempt burglary.

Matthew inched forward, as if to move out of the chair. ‘I know this might all seem like civil harassment,’ he said, clasping his hands together. ‘But Mr Fleisher is a concerned man with

displaced valuables, and we figured coming to his neighbours without fuss would at least reassure everyone in the building that he merely wants what was taken to be returned.'

I nodded along, sympathizing with my downstairs neighbour. Whatever was inside the safe, it would have been valuable to the older man. He lived alone, never speaking of a former love that since ended. I never made assumptions, or at least not aloud, about Mr Fleisher's social life beyond the dinner parties and the murder mystery. Whodunnit.

I liked to believe he could find a nice lady on an online dating app and the closet safe could be shared for their prized possessions. Although that was to assume he was straight, and fortified for love. I suppose I did not know him well enough. Not beneath this entertainer, crowd-pleaser, personality he showcased when he at once became centre of attention and devoid of it, too.

Matthew inched backwards in the chair. 'Try to be unbiased with me,' he continued. 'How do the others, your other neighbours, see Mr Fleisher?' *Objectively*, he mouthed.

I would have to make a running list of everyone in the building, or at least the ones he was frequent to encounter. Rule out at first the older-still man in the first-floor apartment who Mr Fleisher frequently made mention "never left the airbed he called his precious". There was the couple previously mentioned—Elisse and Bryton, in their late twenties. She was flighty and had reservations about her partner's obsession with horror movies. The offensively-gory ones, she would put it. Bryton worked in real estate and played the trumpet. They lived on the same floor as I did, across what constituted as a hallway. It was more a staircase landing, offering three choices: go upstairs, enter one of the apartments, or turn the heck back around and leave.

Upstairs, on the third floor, a pair of roommates lived in the rooms above me. Two men, one of them queer too, both younger than I am. University kids. Reminded me somewhat of Joe and I, if we ever lived together. Those were once serious, calculated conversations—do you really think we wouldn't bite each other's heads off? Or come to find out that the other is a downright sleaze when it comes to the neat-and-tidying, and climb around in the filth to find an industrial-grade vacuum cleaner with a ginormous nozzle to somehow set things back into order again.

The two in the apartment above: Wesley, twenty-two, studying something medical and rooted in his sharp sense of logic. A white lab coat hanging over the rail of a pencil-thin balcony. Wesley, and Isiah, twenty. Isiah was studying psychology. Frankly not a topic he seemed thrilled to discuss, although he typically found a way into other conversations to avoid talking about himself. About his *studies*.

Across the hall from them was a single mother and her kid. A son, I think. We heard very little from them. If there were noise, it was the voice of the boy coming out through the opened windows. He was inquisitive, was one word for it. Liked to pose his thoughts out to the world.

And then, of course, my own roommate. She was at work at the time Matthew was questioning me—I let him aware of this fact when I poured him a glass of water in the kitchen. Abby had two entirely separate states, if I were to label them. Although I was largely unaware of how she acted at work. It was rather plain to me, however, that the Abby who hid herself away in her bedroom listening to a record on low volume was vastly different to the Abby who got herself prepared to leave the house for work.

I attempted to figure how these knowledges about my neighbours, the neighbours who frequented Mr Fleisher's apartment, could pertain to whatever sort of case the police department would be building around the capture of a closet safe. I didn't understand "cases."

Elisse and Bryton saw him, I assumed, as a fatherly figure whom they could turn to when their car was smoking or the washing machine broke. Not that I believed Mr Fleisher to be a man

with an assembled understanding of how to use his hands, but it would be their instinct. I mouth *subjectively* to the police officer.

Wesley liked Mr Fleisher's mind. It was a little psychological to him, perhaps, being able to learn and study from someone longer-lived than he. I liked to think Wesley didn't so much see a father, but a professor. Isiah would see a professor too, but for the opposite sort of reasons. He would dislike feeling overwhelmed by any opportunity his roommate took in probing Mr Fleisher's brain. I couldn't say, then, how exactly Isiah would regard my downstairs neighbour.

Abby liked Mr Fleisher well. More than anyone else in the building. They discussed world politics, hushed in the corner of a dinner party. He always sat her at his end of the table but I saw nothing out of the ordinary about it. I sat on the other side of Abby. I would never be clamouring for more attention from the older man.

I relayed this information to Matthew, albeit trimmed down and as much without bias as possible. There was no reason in my mind for any of them to somehow lift a safe from Mr Fleisher's apartment—they would inevitably feel the guilt associated with seeing him often, or otherwise become more hermitted and avoid his glance and make themselves obvious. Matthew glanced up at me from the notepad and smiled sympathetically. Maybe he believed me, that I thought it incredulous to suggest one of us, one of the people in the building, would be responsible for it. Mr Fleisher, I assumed, didn't like to keep kleptomaniac company.

'Your rent is affordable?' He said, somewhat accusingly. That was how I viewed it. Not surprising for a cop to spin an accusation out of a potential motive.

I hesitated to say, *well nothing is quite affordable nowadays, sir*, but figured he would note down: *struggles under the burden of the price to be alive*. No use hinting to a motive separate from a crime. 'We're always on time with the rent,' I said, unsure whether to smile or keep a straight, flat, monotonous face. The police officer once more noted something in a brief stroke and set the notepad down beside the armchair. The chair, which I had helped him pivot as to be facing the sofa for this discussion, was something Abby had brought with her when we moved into the apartment together. I'd known her from a previous job. We had enough in common to stay friends, and I uncertainly trusted we could live together because I knew at least one thing to be true: she worked an awful lot. The apartment, therefore, would be frequently emptied out of other inhabitants, and I could sit alone in the living room watching the television at a higher volume than I would if she were home attempting to sleep. This police interview was keeping me from watching an episode of something on a streaming service, but more importantly, from unloading the dishwasher and cleaning the mirror in the bathroom.

'Your neighbours?' He continued, abruptly cutting himself off with the upwards inflection of a question mark. 'They're likely the same then, well at managing their finances?'

He should be nosing around their apartments for this information, I thought, pondering whether the money Elisse and Bryton, or Wesley or Isiah, or even the man downstairs to the left had was any of my business.

'I couldn't say,' I replied.

Matthew seemed to be lulling on questions. He moved to the kitchen to refill the glass of water, idling at the window with the glass raised to his lips. It was a strange sight—a plainclothes police officer treating the apartment almost as if it were his own. The sunlight made the glass twinkle. It was mid-morning and I wondered how long he would keep me, somewhat excited now by the idea of emptying the dishwasher. By the idea of wiping the splashed-up specks off the mirror.

He looked at me with a blank expression on his face. The glass remained up towards his face, a bent elbow pointed down toward the kitchen tile. I was crooked on the couch, head swivelled to hold eye-contact with him. Gave me stiff muscles and a sense of discomfort. Matthew's voice was suddenly reassuring. 'Thank you for all the assistance,' he said, setting down the glass on the countertop. 'If I have more questions?' This he posed too as a question—I hadn't given him a phone number, and I would feel unsettled if he were to suggest he would come around to my apartment at any hour, despite any schedule I may have. I was due back at work in the evening. I expected, or hoped, perhaps, that the next time I saw him he could be in uniform. There is something unsettling about a man dressed somewhat familiarly, like the way your brother dressed, sitting on your furniture subtly drawing out hints you could be to blame for a crime.

Was he asking for my number, the brief thought crept into my head, but I buried it.

Wrong to be thinking of anything out of the anxiety but an unburdening.

'I can leave you my number,' I said, awash with confusion. This was the first time a member of the police force considered me somewhat of a leading player in a theft—Mr Fleisher being my downstairs neighbour at least placed me somewhat close to the crime scene, albeit not at the predicted time of said theft. I had to wonder the exacts...when Mr Fleisher noticed...how he couldn't immediately pin it on someone recent, although of course we had all been in attendance on Sunday night for one of his dinner soirees. Nothing treacherous of note for Sunday. But then...had Mr Fleisher seriously not noticed the disappearance of the closet safe until two nights afterwards? Thinking about the act, the crime, was giving me a nauseous mind.

I wrote down my phone number on a torn slip of paper and handed it to him. He already knew my address, and now where I worked—surely only a comfortable five-to-ten-minute drive from the block of apartments. If he was going to attempt to stalk me, he had early leads.

Matthew shook my hand and we walked towards the front door.

'Again, thanks,' he said, conversationally, before opening the door and stepping out into the short hallway. Across from us, the front door to Elisse and Bryton's apartment was closed, decorated sparsely for Christmas. A wreath made of silver tinsel. A space-age Christmas.

He descended the staircase and was soon out of eyesight.

I closed the door behind me.

For a few nights, I struggled to fall asleep. Work was laborious, with customers becoming irrational at the smallest of moments, and there was Matthew's steely gaze striking like an iron rod. Mr Fleisher's too, although my mind toyed with two alternatives. He was to be grinning without surrender, maintaining a certain air, or otherwise he was bitter, desolate, the chill of a tundra landscape at dusk.

I took to calling him Mr Fleisher only because much like the boys in the apartment above, he represented to me a logical figurehead. In him, I understood *place*—Mr Fleisher was astoundingly committed to acting his age. Committed to acting to the tee of a late-forties, early fifties male. Although people have their own interpretations of such a specific-unspecific, such an exact-not-exact. Late forties, early fifties could represent a dignified man, a potential father with teenagers or young adults, someone growing into their wisdom. Or it could represent a middle-aged baby dressed in the same clothing a twenty-three-year-old might wear. There are certain men like this. Men who turn you away from certain articles of clothing, certain stores.

Mr Fleisher was the former—he resoundingly represented dignification. Understandably, the mysterious case of the missing closet safe meant great importance to him, but not because he would be losing a prized collectible from his youth, perhaps. Likely because he didn’t entirely trust the banks.

I lay awake in bed in the evenings, after a late shift or after watching a movie, and I couldn’t outrun some internal feeling that, even innocent, I was being *scared*. Not the act of it, but the target of it—that Mr Fleisher sent Matthew to psychologically harass me, instead of weighing down on my thoughts with a badge and uniform.

I woke up one morning to find Abby in the kitchen pouring herself a bowl of cereal, looking her typical *dishevelled* for a day off work. It was the Saturday, almost an entire week since when I presumed the safe was smuggled out of the apartment *somehow*. I was no detective.

Abby rubbed the crinkled sleep out of her left eye as she leant against the countertop with her stomach. She looked deflated, almost morose. No one had come to question her at home, but I presumed they had tracked down her place of employment and scheduled a makeshift interrogation on a lunch break. Abby’s brown-blond hair hung like it was weighted by something. She spilled a disc of milk on the kitchen counter and sopped it up, or attempted to, with her fingers.

‘Are you okay?’ Immediately I questioned whether the sound of my voice made the question more antagonistic than it needed to be.

Abby lifted her head, feeling around on the countertop for her phone. ‘Exhausting as hell week at work,’ she replied, unlocking her phone with a simple glance down at it. Surprisingly, the technology recognised her out-of-costume. This version of Abby was familiar. It was more commonplace when we worked together at the pizza delivery *restaurant*. It barely constituted as a restaurant—the only customers to remain in store after we handed them their order were the older men who only paid in cash, and the occasional “tourist”.

I had skirted around asking whether she had been interviewed about the closet safe. Mr Fleisher remained largely quiet in his apartment downstairs. The morning before I’d even seen Mr Whatsit from the apartment across from Mr Fleisher’s. I couldn’t remember his name, so I didn’t call out to him. I was leaving the apartment to do some grocery shopping, I found it more peaceful and less overwhelming on a Friday morning, and there he was, standing out on the footpath in his age-appropriate pyjamas. Holding a small waste basket, white without a lid. It was empty and he was standing far from any other bin. There he stood, clutching the waste basket as if waiting to catch something as it fell from the clouded sky.

Odd man.

Abby scooped cornflakes out of the bowl as she sat on the sofa watching the television. There was a certain lifelessness to this routine. I gave her Saturday mornings to escape from out underneath a weight, which managed as a better description for the act than any abstract metaphor.

She was mere inches from where I sat talking to Officer Matthew, or whatever title he properly possessed. I couldn’t shake the image out of memory. His easy comfortableness. It could become difficult to ascertain whether Matthew wasn’t another part of my history, whether I was conflating this image of him in the green polo and the stripped-back almost bareness was because I’d known him as plain Matthew. Though it didn’t make sense. His face was new to me. I was working off little sleep and a bout of it-verges-on-insanity. I couldn’t take myself seriously. I needed a walk away from the apartment, but I moved my feet out the front door and up the stairwell, instead of down it. Out of instinct, I rapped on the door to Wesley and Isiah’s.

Thinkin’, hopin’, they would be awake and on-foot at 8am.

Isiah greeted me at the door with a spray bottle in his right hand.

I didn't completely know why I had gone to their apartment.

I just did.

Their apartment was much similar in layout to mine. Two bedrooms, a cramped bathroom, a similar size living room. The furnishings at least did not give me trauma flashbacks to the interview with Matthew, although, of course, I could not get the feeling of being watched out of my head. Wesley's bedroom door was closed. I presumed he was still asleep, which was likely a relief, for him.

Isiah moved to spray one of the plants on the windowsill, at first ignoring me entirely. The squirting sound was a soft rhythm, and I lingered at first in the kitchen, leaning with my elbows on the countertop. Isiah moved into that apartment after I did, and when we first were introducing ourselves to each other, forming those early friendly bonds, we did the neighbourly version of coming out to one another. I felt strangely more serene with another homosexual man in the building.

He set the spray bottle down on an end table beside the sofa and lifted his head over to where I was standing, idled. 'What's going on in your world then?' He said, stepping away from the table and back towards the kitchen. Before I could respond he asked me whether I wanted a glass of water with some ice cubes in it. I nodded, made a quick reply yes, and then—well, I suppose I attempted to unpack why I had shifted from wanting fresh air to wanting different company. Abby could become irritatingly dry on any given Saturday morning. Part of me couldn't fault that. Every anecdote about a job she claimed once was her destiny now sounded vacantly miserying.

'I have these dreams where he's catching me in the act of something,' I said, lifting my elbows off the counter and lingering near Isiah as he pours water from a filtered jug he had fetched out of the fridge. 'Trying to hide between his clothes, or extracting the blade of a knife out of my shins, or in the midst of undressing. Something like that.'

Isiah shifted with the glass in his hand. A concerned look on his face, although it could be one of confusion, too. 'Who is?' he replied, pausing. 'Who's catching you, I mean.'

'Mr Fleisher.'

'Did you take his whatsit?' Isiah said, without delay. Concern, again.

'No.'

Sometimes queer men can be responsive to each other's glances. I liked to believe Isiah understood in the moment I was telling the truth—that I had not found a moment alone in Mr Fleisher's bedroom, somehow snuck the safe out of the closet and onto my person without anyone noticing. I tried to recall what I was wearing on the Sunday evening. Nothing overly baggy or like a fabric hide-and-go-seek funhouse. A t-shirt, a pair of jeans. Although I was presuming the safe's size. It could not have been paper-thin to slip into my pocket.

'Why are you worried then?'

I scrunched up my face. I didn't know. It was the same feeling I had had while being interviewed by the plainclothes police officer. A waking dread, of unknown origin. The feeling of agitation that could come from worrying someone would plant something in your own closet to give you away. How the true culprit could allude all suspicion when someone else got inside of their own head. 'I only seem to worry when I'm fast asleep,' I said, a half-lie. 'The dreams play out like tortured repetitious fantasies. I'm in the bedroom, although we don't go in his bedroom, so parts are imagined. The colour of the curtains. How clustered the closet is. Over and over I am making enough of my own noise to drown out the twist of the bedroom door handle and he saunters in, catching me. Helplessly, noiselessly, I have to explain myself...' It was never of any great use

really. Isiah was staring at me with a look I took a moment to process. Part of him must have assumed I only expected to be able to confess to the thing of it by releasing the guilt in crashing waves against the white, white sand. I was only shaken. I wanted him to know I was only shaken.

Had Matthew come to him?

Was that all I cared about suddenly, the looming presence of a man who had acted in response to a middle-aged gentleman furious about the disappearance of something. They would be grateful it wasn't a murder, a homicide. Everyone involved. Isiah showed no sign of disapproval. Of misunderstanding. He watched me as I swallowed a mouthful of the water.

'You've got nothing to worry over if you didn't do nothing,' he said.

We retreated to the sofa, me setting the water down on a coaster on another end table. Isiah made a quick hesitant glance towards Wesley's bedroom door down the hall before making himself more comfortable. He seemed at ease then, less shaken by everything than I was, obviously so. Maybe I was simply getting the wires too tangled in my head. I felt no guilt for anything Fleisher related. Isiah took the spray bottle up in his hands and threatened, playfully, to spray me with it.

'Get it out of your head that you can do anything about it,' he said, smiling. He accidentally pulled the trigger and a mist of water prematurely blinded me, just for a moment. 'Eek, sorry,' he continued, almost wiping my face with his hand. 'But you get it, right? If you did nothing wrong, and you witnessed nothing wrong, this internal dialogue about it only comes from a need to FIND something wrong.' Isiah seemed to be putting his degree-in-progress to some use. I sat there beside him on the sofa attempting to shift a mindset I wanted to believe was merely an illusion. A day-dream, night-dream, whatever.

I hadn't realised I was *worrying*. The tossing and turning at night seemed more akin to discomfort than worry. Mr Fleisher was not someone who needed my worry, nor my discomfort, truly. His safe would turn up or it would not. Matthew would call my phone number or he would not. Isiah did wonders to distract me. We spent the morning at first talking about other things—he tried to ask me if I was talking to anyone, which was queer code for flirting with someone. It had been months since I had been on a single date, I avoided dating apps, and I didn't get any excitement over romance. But he remained curious. He himself was potentially seeing someone, which was queer code for 'they'd gone on a few dates and slept with each other one night they were both thinking about it'. Wesley woke up, or at least stirred out of his bedroom, and buttered himself some toast and ate while watching over at the two of us getting competitive over a video game.

We ordered delivery food for lunch at about 1pm and sat on the sofa eating it.

That was an afforded Saturday. A quiet resistance.

I made a mental note to spend more time with the boys upstairs when I could. It felt proper, to make these sorts of friendships with people your age who just so happened to live in your apartment building.

I hoped Abby wasn't downstairs sobbing on the carpet.

At 8:34, I stood on the footpath bathed in the glow of a streetlight. There was something rustling about across the road in the bushes—I squinted, in the dark, as if that would assist me in making out the finer details. I figured it would be a possum, at this time of night. Possums weren't too common anymore, at least not with my luck. Quick flashes of their corpses on all the bitumen roads. No one wanted to slow down anymore.

It had been two weeks. I wanted to quit this job, though the income was a desperate necessity. One night I stayed up until 1am in the morning and started planning out a vacation I could afford but also would struggle to justify. I searched for hotels, dreamed up itineraries, and texted Isiah, who couldn't sleep because he was studying for a lengthy exam. I sent him a darkly-fading selfie and he messaged back, *you're gonna be grumpy with yourself in the morning. Also you're cute sleep-deprived too, what the hell.*

I was idling on the footpath waiting for someone to come give me a lift. A friend of mine, Sutton, wanted to take me out for dinner sometime soon, but nothing could align with either of our schedules. This was the alternative, the semi-middle-ground. She offered to give me a lift from work back to the building, where we would make-do at home and hopefully not bother my roommate. I'd sort of hoped Sutton would be awaiting me after the shift, but she was void and blank. No new text messages. No *sorry I'm running behind.*

I waited for a few minutes with no response. I'd messaged her asking if she was alright, considering a possible freak accident, or more likely that she'd had to respond to some sort of emergency. Things morphing into new problems seemed alarming frequent. Abby was down with a sickness she must have caught from work. She coughed into a pale pink handkerchief when I saw her before I left for work. 'I'll be giving it to you,' she said, nasally.

Nothing of Sutton. It was 8:37pm at this point and I was walking home, listening to a podcast on financial scams. Somewhere in the States, a man had swindled out of his own family a sizeable amount in which he claimed to have been donating to aid relief in one of the islands—he'd told several of his older relatives it was Haiti, but his same-age cousins seemed to believe he told them it was Cuba. None of this money reached any charity, any deserving soul. This had happened maybe five or six years ago.

It started to rain. Light rain, at least, dampening the top of my head. We live life a little in the *deja-vu* of things. Sometimes I check twice when I lock the front door to the apartment in case my memory of locking it is simply because every time I lock the door it is a *deja-vu*ous act. A repetition. Locking the door cannot practically be dissimilar, or else people would forget how to lock their front door. I felt a sense of something as I passed the twenty minutes to get home, coming up to the staircase, shaking the rain off me. I think I expected to come upon something in the apartment. Abby curled into a ball in the corner of the room, spilling warm ginger and honey tea on herself. A scalding burn from her first sip, like a pained stain on her forearm. The television set to one of the late-night news broadcast channels, playing out a disturbing scene. Sutton somehow mentioned in an upsetting crime spree.

Unlocking the apartment, I was greeted only with darkness. The light was out from underneath Abby's door, so I assumed she was attempting to sleep off the sickness to be able to return to work. They would be desperate for her. Chomping off her sick leave day by day. This was only the first. Her towel in the bathroom was noticeably damp. I stripped down out of the wet clothes and ran the water in the shower. Sutton hadn't messaged back at all.

While I showered, Isiah sent me a text message: *I meant to tell you Mr Fleisher is organising another one of his soirees.* Water droplets fell from my hair as I hovered over the phone, processing a response. Strangely, it wasn't to be an immediate 'I'm in', not after recently. I felt a duty to at least continue the relationships I had with the people in the building, sans Mr Whatsit and the single mother who lived opposite the boys upstairs. She kept to herself.

I texted back: *as long as you two are going to be there.* And waited. Soaking wet, my body only drying in the middle thanks to the towel. It was 9:19pm and I stared at the three dots.

Despite knowing it wouldn't be a complete disaster, with Isiah and Wesley seated opposite no doubt, and Abby to his left as to be expected, I weighed the inevitable evening at Mr Fleisher's like it were a heart. A heart on the scale, comparative to a feather. Ma'at and all that is truthful.

He organised it strangely—I never seemed to see him in person lately, despite his living downstairs and me having to pass his door frequently to go anywhere. Not that I felt a compulsion to go see him. Mr Fleisher slipped an invitation under the door the next morning and Abby and I read the finer details. The seventeenth, a Sunday, guests should arrive at 5pm. His apartment of course, no one needed to be reminded of its address. Dress code: think 1940s. Abby and I groaned. He was inviting us to let more of the depression in. Albeit, the capital-D Depression had ended by the '40s, but neither of us knew our history to the specifics. Abby began to ask if I could pick her something out.

'I'll go after work sometime,' she said with a shrug instead, listing a handful of charity shops and second-hand stores she knew of in the city. I was worried, with her schedule, they would all be closed by the time she wandered out onto the streets after finishing up for the evening, but I said nothing. Isiah wanted to get out of the house and go looking for himself, and I had most of the day off.

'I thought about inviting Noe, to see what Mr Fleisher's reaction would be, an intrusion from outside the building, you know, but by then he was leaving me hanging for hours and giving me stupid half-responses.' Isiah was talking again about the boy he'd been *talking to*. I figured this was the end of that. The grumpy frown disappeared by the time we were browsing through the limited array of clothing we considered "old-fashioned", akin to the 1940s. Nothing seemed period-appropriate, and we uttered frustrated curses to a man we never once called by his first name. Could I even remember what it was? Frank? Paul? *Larry*?

Isiah pressed a black button-up against his chest and modelled for me.

'Does it work?'

I studied him, just for that moment. How it would look when he waltzed into the downstairs apartment with Wesley, who would hopefully be dressed more appropriately too. It suited him, although it seemed more modern-day, but who were we kidding thinking we would stumble upon the perfect look for a sit-down dinner for no special occasion.

'It works for you,' I said, going back to my own browsing. Isiah modelled the shirt against his chest in front of a mirror on the door of one of the changing rooms, which, all things considered, was a square box fitted with a door. Cramped and uncomfortable, we were both likely to whack our arms into the walls trying to edge our arms into the holes of any shirt. 'Are you getting it?' I continued, masking my distraction. I was seriously considering disappointing Mr Fleisher to avoid having to put the energy and effort into finding something else to wear. I had clothes in the closet, items I'd not worn in a while, just anticipating to be at first on my skin, then in the washing machine. I made a mental note to do the washing.

'Wes is skipping classes again,' Isiah said, attempting to figure out the best way to hold the coat-hanger and start browsing through the section labelled for pants.

A natural instinct to sigh. It made me feel inherently grown, older—*kids these days*.

'His sleep schedule's not fucked up is it?'

Isiah folded his lips in over themselves. The expression was somewhat childish, yet he didn't make it so. 'We both make the stupid mistake of leaving things to the last minute, sometimes.' He flicked through an assortment of ugly pants.

The last thing I wanted was to feel like I was therapizing someone who wasn't even there, but from the outside, I worried, sometimes. About the quiet hush of him. How uncomplicated it had been to make a bond with Isiah, yet how, when I thought about it as a processing mechanism, I wondered if Wesley would ever flip the switch from neighbour to friend. I couldn't even bring myself to feel comfortable calling him Wes.

'What does he do when he skips going?'

'I have no idea.' Isiah shrugged. 'I don't believe he goes to class, but he leaves the house. Maybe he goes someplace else, I don't know.'

Not my business, at the end of the day. Matthew's voice rang in my head. Like a swift kick between two sentences, an audible scrambling of pieces, to make exact what I was then thinking. *How well do you know - - Wesley?* Could be some strange terror for police officers crawling round inside me, then. Maybe that had been keeping me tossing and turning in the night. Police officers.

Isiah found something to wear for Mr Fleisher's soiree, and I hoped there would be something in the closet. We walked out of the store, waving to the cashier, a woman in approximately her sixties. Hair too white to be called grey. She had fumbled, briefly, when entering in the cost of Isiah's purchases, but neither of us reacted any differently. Sweet woman. Likely-not-to-see-again woman. Something like that could sound so incredibly morbid. Likely-not-to-remember-then woman.

On the bus headed back towards the apartment, neither of us mentioned anything Wesley-centric again. Isiah was noticeably still somewhat hung up on Noe—he mentioned sending another somewhat in-your-feelings message to him, about the crevice opening between the two of them. Noe was being coy, or more aptly, distant. Distracted. Isiah pulled up a stupid, yet slightly hilarious, picture he'd found on Twitter and sent over to Noe. Isiah said the other male's response was just to laugh-react the picture and, uh, did that indicate anything? Interest or not-anymore.

I hadn't been in a relationship in a while and I think perhaps I was forgetting how to be. Be in one. Living vicariously through your friend's love life can only take you so far, and I caught myself before I said something morose about picking your battles.

At the apartment, we parted ways. Isiah carried the clothes up the flight of stairs and I stood there on the sidewalk, checking my phone before I moved any further. Sutton was dead-silent. She hadn't posted anything in fifteen days, although that wasn't entirely out of the ordinary for her.

My finger hovered over the **call** button.

We weren't on the right terms for me to be bothering her.

Yet. It was inching towards twenty-four hours without a word.

'Hi, sorry, I know there's a chance I'm interrupting your dinner—'

Her voice cut me off, immediately reassuring. 'Darling, you're okay, what's going on?'

I sighed a breath of relief and hovered over Sutton's name on the page of paper in front of me. 'Have you heard from Sutton lately? In the last few days.' She hadn't responded to a message from me in four days. In other circumstances, I would be less concerned, but you could say I was rattled by recent events. There was a news report about a local murder, and while I attempted to avoid hearing about *the news*, it was inescapable by then. On Reddit, someone had posted the article

detailing the death of an eighteen-year-old boy. He had been working to save for university, just a kid, a young thing whose body had been found in an abandoned house on the other side of this suburb. Depressing news, really.

I was on the phone to someone Sutton and I both knew—a friend from high school, too, who had somehow radically matured in the time between graduation and this very moment. She was married now, with a baby attached to her hip. A little girl named Autumn.

She called people *darling* and *hon* unironically and shared recipes onto her Facebook page. Dana was becoming a mother, a proper mother, and I presumed she was settling well into the home she and her mining husband bought together somewhere further up north.

Something shuffled in the background and for a moment I was convinced Dana had set her phone down as an alternative to putting me on mute. Sutton had never answered my calls. Her voicemail inbox seemed like an impersonal skirmish—it didn't sound like her, when half of it was the robotic automatic response and the two words that were her voice, her first and last name, were sniffly and croaky, as if she had swallowed a toad.

'Sorry, hon, Autumn started HOWLING for me. I swear it, she was fearful for her life in the bedroom. I keep the cot in there, but then I meander into the kitchen to get myself some water in a tall glass, and she must just sense there is a germ of potential I have abandoned her, something like that. Sorry, Hale, you were asking about Sutton?'

I nodded, then remembered I was on a phone call. 'Yeah, she went quiet on me.'

'You know how busy I've been with this kid,' Dana said, sighing. 'You don't completely, of course, and you're right for expecting us to be at least tagging each other in things and her asking me how the baby is.' She paused, and I wondered the same again, had she set the phone down—

'None of that since...Tuesday.'

I froze. It could be pure coincidence. It could be pure *coincidence*.

When Dana hung up, off to make sure her little munchkin hadn't choked on air or flopped into an uncomfortable position and cut off circulation, I searched forever for contact information for Matthew. It slammed into me quick enough. I hadn't ever received anything from him, which seemed strange, no possible easy line of communication between the two of us, from my end at least. I guessed I could phone the local police station and they would patch me through, but imagine if he was off-duty or somewhere else, tending to some other crime scene. I realised I had no clue what the life of a police officer looked like.

Underneath Sutton's name I wrote: *Dana hasn't heard from her. Suspicious*. I felt like a proper fanfiction detective, making these slight, handwritten connections between things in my spare time. I had to go empty the dishwasher, iron a uniform, respond to someone asking me about their birthday celebration in a couple weeks, and tirelessly go through the clothes in my closet for something to wear to Mr Fleisher's impending *event*.

A message came through from Joe: *how are the books going?* I hadn't touched them since the day he had given them to me, well, only to move them further out of the way and to lightly dust them occasionally. I hadn't said a word about anything to Joe, preferring instead to keep up the ruse of everything as perfectly normal. Because everything was perfectly normal. I was only giving myself ideas of a sharp change.

Joe was looking forward to spending a week with me somewhere.

Joe was liking some of the hotels I sent through to him, seemingly ignoring the timestamps for when I'd been sending them to him. Yes, he wanted to go do more touristy things with me, no, he was alright with spending more money than usual. He was making more money with this new

job; it was keeping him thinking on the bright side. *You should talk to Abby then*, I wanted to type back. But I hesitated, backspaced, stared heavenward. The fan circulated air overhead.

Abby knocked on my bedroom door, swinging it open without warning. She rightfully predicted I wasn't in any sort of precarious position—I wasn't naked, I wasn't dangling from the ceiling like a bat, and I wasn't lying in a pool of my own blood.

I was sitting in front of my laptop, looking for something to watch to avoid housework. Abby sniffled.

'Hey,' she said, kicking the door with her foot as she began to adjust the low ponytail of her hair. 'You haven't seen my work laptop, have you?'



The pants were potentially too tight. Abby and I lingered for a moment in front of Mr Fleisher's apartment door, on the Sunday, the seventeenth day of the month. Abby wore a dress that was only half-appropriate theme-wise, although she gave me a look that suggested she no longer cared. Hers had been a headache of a week, and she groaned before the door swung open to reveal Mr Fleisher with a smile. 'Oh, come on in, you pair,' he said, waving out an arm in a sweeping motion as he we stepped into the apartment.

I'd been cautious about asking Mr Fleisher how he was. With Abby's unbalanced mood, and my own woes and worries, everyone in the apartment building was seeming a little off-centre. I made a quick glance for Isiah in the living room, but he wasn't there. The room was largely empty, except for Elisse and Bryton over in the corner. She was perched on the arm of the sofa; he was hovering beside her, a drink in hand. A mug from Mr Fleisher's travels to Austria. A Gustav Klimt print wrapping round the ceramic. Abby and Mr Fleisher hugged, which was strange to witness. I was struggling to remember if it was something that had happened in the past. I had plenty of distractions.

'If you need to use the restroom,' Mr Fleisher began. 'Be mindful of the cabinet beside the door, it fell in a storm after a foot gave way.' He gestured briefly down the hall, although out of politeness, really, neither of us followed the arrow of his hand. 'Old rattly thing, it is. But now when you go to purchase new furniture it is all so flattened down, and I have no time to bend and croak.' We made brief conversation about antique-hunting, and Mr Fleisher detailed the handful of second-hand stores he had frequented recently to scope out options. Most of the items were too large and would be overly indulgent in the apartment, he'd said, making a slight gesture with his hands of the ideal size cabinet. About the same size as what he had, truthfully, although he thought the colour too dowdy and the shelves buckling underneath the weight ever so slightly too.

Mr Fleisher retreated to the kitchen. His apartment was unlike mine in every aspect, except perhaps the colour of the walls, the moody caramel of the carpet in the living room, and the shape and size of the windows. They had been particular, then, when building this block to render elements familiar. Elisse adjusted her butt on the cylindrical arm of the armchair and smiled to the

both of us as we lingered near, empty handed. Bryton turned his head, straining his neck. They were a sweet couple. Unmarried, together for a time, in which they had lived together for most of the relationship. She had lived in the United States for half her childhood, so somewhat of an accent came through on certain words, like *burger*, or *cost of living crisis*.

Bryton poured the remnants of whatever was contained within the Gustav Klimt mug down his throat and coughed, slightly. We made a small circle around them, with Bryton moving to lean against the wall with the soles of his socked feet. Mr Fleisher was opposed to shoes on inside the apartment, but seemingly detested bare toes too.

‘Neat party,’ Bryton said, making eye-contact with Abby before staring down into the bottom of the mug. Elisse switched focus between the two of us as we rambled briefly on trying, at least attempting, to find a costume for the 1940s theme. Elisse laughed—this was something she found in the closet and simply accentuated with accessories and a different technique for styling her hair. She thought she looked rather smashing, albeit too glamorous for an era struck by the perilous misgivings of the second world war. The moment soured on the mention of Nazi Germany.

Mr Fleisher was still somewhere else in the apartment—the low hum of the kettle purred out from the kitchen. ‘We didn’t know if we should come, actually,’ Elisse said, poking her head around to make certain our host was nowhere to be seen in the living room. ‘It’s only, we were both exhausted from the week, and yesterday, Bryton’s parents had invited us out to the beach, and one of the young kids, Bryton’s nephew, was so sick, coughing and sneezing and wiping his nose on sandy beach towels...we figured there ought to be a chance Bryton has caught something from him, or I have, you know?’ Both of them glanced at one another with uncertainty. The moment was fleeting.

‘We both feel fine, in case you were feeling like you ought to step back,’ Bryton said, with a charismatic sort of smile. A smile I am certain without doubt works on the sweet, sensitive mother-type homebuyers, who need a confident, gentle man to sell them the product. An ordinary looking house, with a tight garage and hardly any backyard. *But the kids won’t mind. Nor the hubby. Less mowing and weeding and whippersnapping for him.*

Abby reassured them both, scratching at her hairline. ‘There’s a weird atmosphere.’ She made a passing glance at the front door of the apartment, and our eyes all seemed to flicker there, in suspense of a new arrival. Nothing, no sound, so I question whether her reaction, the turning, the glance, was built-in from the curiosity of the what-next. ‘I think I might go check on him.’ Abby smiled, an attempt at sympathy, before disappearing down the hall to the kitchen.

Her voice could be heard as mumbled gibberish.

Elisse straightened out and made a move to sit down in the armchair instead.

‘They had other intentions for us,’ she said, glancing briefly over to me.

‘They?’

‘Not a singular god, not God, but more of a spiritual feeling.’ She sighed, having returned her attention back to me. ‘It’s not something I believe in completely, that our choices and fates are deemed by some other being. But throughout university, my mother was getting hooked on it, or, I suppose, she was training herself through it, alongside my own training. She read the books, with a bent bookmark because it was a spiritual connection, this relic of the past, instead of something she could have collected off the counter when she bought the books. Which weren’t relics, far from them. Brand new, crisp pages, the new book smell you bibliophiles seem to love.’ Elisse paused, scratching at the hem of the dress. ‘If men have pairs of underwear for days of the week, then my mother started to have a god or goddess for a Monday through Sunday. They could change on a

dime, and those were her words—the power that be you offer your thanks to is dependent on far more than English’s strange naming trends for days of the week.’

Elisse took a moment to catch her breath, glancing around as if she had misplaced a mug or glass that which contained whatever she had been sipping on. Her movements were subtle, yet somehow both fast-paced and cautioned. There wasn’t a nervousness to the way she reacted to herself.

‘Do you know why it’s called Thursday, for example?’

I did, but I didn’t want to interrupt. I shook my head on instinct, a signal for her story time to continue. Bryton stood beside the sofa resting the Gustav Klimt mug in the middle of his palm.

‘He’s everywhere now, thanks to a string of Marvel superheroes movies, but Thor’s got his day in the week, though my mother doesn’t pay much attention to Norse mythology.’ Elisse wordlessly communicated with her partner, and Bryton disappeared, too, further into the apartment into the kitchen. We were left alone and I made myself properly comfortable on the sofa. Made no sense to not become more relaxed.

‘My mother, she doesn’t hound me with her godly pursuits anymore. A year or so ago, she was alone at night after having watched a concerto performance in the city, and as she walking back towards the train station, she witnessed a man she predicted to be homeless cross the street without looking and become putty, jelly, on the windshield of a car.’ Elisse breathed out. ‘Awful shit,’ she said. ‘Do you believe much in a universal presence?’

There is no God, I thought, without speaking it aloud. Having been raised just out of arm’s reach of Christianity, I had mingled with the thought and the worship of what now seemed like pure storytelling. Perhaps a man had done those things, but perhaps they were embellished, too, like I would imagine any writer or author or wordsmith magician could do when laying down the bricks of their trade, i.e. words, sentences, prose.

Elisse was watching me, although not suspiciously, or harassingly. ‘I like to believe things happen and our minds have been shaped into making inferences,’ I said, putting a dollop of emphasis on the word *inferences*. ‘Whether you want to put a name to a phenomenon or not is how an individual chooses to believe, really.’ I started to worry I was giving a potential Christian in the room an out, except it was only Elisse and I, sitting in the quiet peace of an older man’s living room.

‘There’s always someone else to blame, with a pantheon of gods.’

I smiled at her in agreement. ‘Someone to blame, someone to curse.’

‘My mother gave it up when the homeless man found himself having reached two outcomes. One, his suffering was over. She predicted he had found himself home again. But two, the last of his suffering had been the worst of his suffering. He had died a horrible death.’ She shook her head.

‘She didn’t want to think someone else responsible for the shock except the person who died and the person sitting in the driver’s seat.’ Elisse concluded.

Bryton returned from the kitchen with the mug refilled. The liquid surface shimmered as he attempted an even balance in handing off the Austrian mug to Elisse. She beamed, swallowing down a mouthful of what looks to be plain full cream milk. Pure assumption, on the colour, on the man.

‘Still on your mother?’

Elisse returned the mug to Bryton’s grip. ‘We were just wrapping it up,’ she said, glancing over at me. ‘I don’t have these sorts of philosophical-almost conversations with her anymore, not because I can’t handle the debate, but because her eyes become glossy thinking about it.’ Elisse paused. ‘People change perspective, it’s only natural.’

That was the last to be heard on the subject of Elisse's mother. We drifted from there, speaking boringly, swiftly, on the topic of work and a desperate need to escape it, for say a party or social gathering, or more accurately, a vacation. This sort of conversation at least brightened the room. Bryton was labouring, at the moment, through the delayed sale of a modest house a few streets over. A married couple had near-finalised everything, until they changed their mind in the middle of the night. 'The deflated look on the homeowner,' he said, drooping his lips into a frown. 'He regrets buying the place, is how I see it.'

Sometime into a conversation about dinner reservations and restaurants the couple recommend, Abby and Mr Fleisher returned into the living room each carrying a platter of various cheeses, cured meat, grapes, and olives. These they set down on a tableclothed chest of drawers set against one of the walls. Abby stood, at first, awkwardly to the right of the spread, making fleeting eye-contact with the three of us. Once Mr Fleisher had cleared his throat, she spoke, using a tone I predicted was more familiar and welcomed when she vanished out of her non-work persona and into the one deemed more professional.

'Please, help yourselves.' I winked to her, perhaps in a way to ease the nerves I assumed were raging within her. She'd been a little on-edge ever since the laptop completely disappeared from the apartment. I reasoned, if it wasn't here, and it wasn't still on her desk at work, maybe she had misplaced it on the bus? This did nothing for the worry. 'Don't scoff down too much, Mr Fleisher has outdone himself with the dinner preparations.' The wink, too, did nothing but bounce off her exterior. Abby swivelled and started to pick. Fingers like the beaks of cranes.

A sudden knock on the door as Bryton moved to the chest of drawers and skewered an olive with a toothpick. Mr Fleisher excused himself without a word and glided over to the front door of his apartment. Bryton poked the olive into his mouth and wide-eye glanced over at Elisse and me while he chewed around the pit.

'Come in, gentlemen,' he said from the door, sweeping arm movement again. The apartment layout was absurd and unconventional. The front entrance immediately opened onto a dining space, an open floor-plan type, with an extended dining table of dark cherry wood. Isiah kicked his shoes off at the door, doing well to balance himself and the medium-sized, wrapped item in his hands. Sudden freeze—I hadn't thought it necessary to bring anything. Wesley was behind him, gently swinging a bottle of red wine in the grip of his left hand. He hadn't worn shoes down the two flights of stairs.

Mr Fleisher gestured for the gift to be placed...somewhere. In a sudden flurry, he was animated and uncertain, at first insisting the dining table, then reconsidering, considering the dinner plans and all. At last, he swooped the wrapped present out of Isiah's hands and vanished with it further into the apartment, either into the kitchen or his bedroom. It was anyone's guess, truly.

'Good to see everyone could make it,' Bryton began as the final two guests tentatively moved from the entrance to the living room. In the fuss, Mr Fleisher had forgotten the wine or forgotten to notice it. Wesley pointed it like you would point a cane, or an umbrella, or a golf club. Isiah noticed, shrugged, and took the bottle from his hand.

He set the wine down on the tablecloth and bent his head to nibble like a mouse.

'Has the old man been acting foolishly then?' Wesley intoned, making eye-contact sparingly with the handful of us gathered together in an informal half-circle. No one responded at first, as if Mr Fleisher stood behind him, in a new state of shock. But the aforementioned old man was nowhere to be seen. Bryton laughed him off.

It was unexpected. Almost a disrespectful act.

But I felt no urge to defend Mr Fleisher.

‘If he thinks a bear trap like socialising will force one of us to confess, he’s mistaken,’ Bryton admitted, taking a swig afterwards from the Austrian mug. He and Wesley shared a knowing look.

‘The old fool **would** think we’d done it.’

Elisse, silent in the armchair, glanced over at me.

‘One of us,’ Bryton said. ‘Watch how he becomes cautious every time someone goes to the bathroom, thinking they could strike again. If we time out our bathroom breaks, men especially, we can play an in-jest prank on him. No harm in it, I promise.’ At this, he took Elisse’s hand in his as reassurance, although the trick could not be replicated on myself or Isiah. Me and the boy from upstairs made a series of signals with just our eyes—potentially to be misunderstood, certainly by someone else, but what we communicated I felt was simple enough to understand. *He’s your neighbour. He’s your roommate. It’s hopefully harmless. Mr Fleisher is a grown man.*

They plotted, these men, to take a bathroom break sometime during dinner one right after the other, with “sensible” overlap. The idea was to fool Mr Fleisher into thinking they were aligning their plans to pilfer something else out of the older gentleman’s bedroom. Although, once more, how anyone believed the closet safe had been stolen during a social gathering in the apartment was beyond me. Mr Fleisher would not have a pocket-sized closet safe.

‘This germination isn’t sensible,’ Elisse said, extending out her hand to take the mug from her partner, the foolish real estate agent. ‘Don’t let him find out you’re even entertaining it.’

She became serious, stern, and I was reminded of how she spoke about the reaction her mother had had to the accident she witnessed. A certain coldness, like being caught locked outside your home in the middle of winter. An Australian winter, mind you. Less snow, more a chilly dismembering of the typical sweating heat. Elisse sighed, emptying the remnants of the mug down her throat. With the smattering of cheeses and meats out of arms reach, moving to get something to eat proved to be an easy conversation-escaper. I had my back to the small congregation, five people in total without me present, and then I’d remembered Abby was sitting there silently, on the carpeted ground. When I looked over at her, she had closed her eyes, tuning out the conversation.

I thought to move to see if she were alright, but hesitated.

Despite a sense of a connection to the older man, Abby was no more attached to him than the rest of us. She spent sparsely any time alone with him, besides when she assisted him in the kitchen or caught him outside the building coming back from work. She joked it was comforting being around him for how little he reminded her of her own father, a purer ideal of stereotyped masculinity from the stories I knew. From the brief interactions we’d had. Her father, a divorced man who’d had a string of two- to three-year-long relationships since, had helped us move into the building.

Regardless, Abby seemed closed-off, as if she were cornering herself. Bryton and Wesley continued to jokingly shift conversation topics, having outgrown the subject of pranking Mr Fleisher. Isiah was typing speedily on his phone, a message that would in haste reach whomever it was intended for. I wondered, then, if Noe had said anything more than *yeah, good* in the last three hours. Elisse excused herself to the restroom, her gait swifter than usual. Attempting to outrun any cruel joking around whether something in the older man’s possession could be hidden within her clothes. Abby remained on the floor, her legs like railway lines. She’d had a frustrating conversation with the IT fellow at work.

No, I don't know where I misplaced the laptop. She said those words were verbatim what she had said to him, a tall—by tall, she meant ‘over six-foot’—redhaired-but-not-noticeably-Scottish-or-Irish man with whom she had barely spoken to since she was hired for the position. *We can change the password, sure,* she'd said, and in repeating it, she added layer upon layer of dry sarcasm and a tongue in the shape of a fist. *But it won't make a difference if I left it, by some fucking miracle, on the seat of the bus and a hacker came along with greedy, sweaty, stinky palms and wanted to see what I was up to.* This part she hadn't said aloud until we were in the privacy of our kitchen, and her raised voice couldn't be reported to something like Human Resources.

‘Abby,’ I said, lowering my voice to a whisper.

She parted her lips as if to respond, but her eyes remained closed.

Abby, you can speak.

Now I felt pressuring, almost.

Sometimes a person can sense an aura, can react accordingly based on aura alone. This I worried for Abby, as her mouth closed without having made a sound, except the soft breathing completely normal for any old girl in her twenties.

How could she read my face without opening her eyes?

Or, expertly, was she peeking through the tiniest of cracks, enough to notice I was more concerned than I should be? Less jovial to be at a social gathering, less avoidant of thinking Mr Fleisher held something of contempt for us all until he uncovered wherever the hell his closet safe had disappeared to. *A physical, non-living item cannot walk on sprung legs, Hale.*

‘Are you alright?’ I said, sitting in front of her on the carpet.

At first, merely a nod. Abby, still with eyes closed, shifted her head from the centre away from everyone else, towards the wall and the draping floor-length curtains. It was unclear whether a window existed beyond these curtains. They sapped the room of light. Although at this time, the sun was obscuring itself behind clouds and the horizon, off to shine on another part of the world.

Abby scratched at her forehead. ‘How it aches when you misplace something,’ she said, for once opening her eyes. They were worn down eyes. ‘How you forget the tribulations of losing something until you do, and the ramification of losing something cannot be a time-bandage when you have found that something again. No one gets to time-travel the moment they find their *thing* again.’ I think Abby hoped she could upturn a pillow underneath the bed and suddenly find the laptop, low on charge, but operational, void of trespassers. No dice. She tore the apartment in fours attempting to find it. Attempting to time-travel, too.

‘I should call the police,’ she said, rubbing her temples. Her face in constant alteration by her fingers, the push and pull upon her skin. When she finally lowered down her hands, as if in retaliation to them having ever been there, she sighed her hands into her lap. ‘Mr Fleisher said he wanted nothing to do with them, they are slimy devils, he said, and although I had it right to be half-insulted, he has the right to be bothered.’ Abby glanced over at the glass platters of food. ‘I want grapes,’ she uttered, once licking her lips.

Before I could respond, Abby clambered to her feet and excused herself to the charcuterie table/tableclothed chest of drawers. ‘Mr Fleisher had contacted the police,’ I muttered under my breath to absolutely no one. I caught Elisse's gaze and we smiled at one another, a hesitant expression, really. Bryton was engaged in a discussion that required him to be talking in long, uninterrupted sentences, where he caught breaths in the wind between prepositions and full stops. He shook his head vigorously. I could tell Isiah paid little attention, although his phone was tucked away into the pocket of his attempt-at-accuracy 1940s pants. They were pants, but he looked dashing.

Abby fed herself grapes, the wrong-era priestess or Egyptian queen. A spark could be glimpsed from a certain angle. It was a distraction, more or less, the eating of fruit.

I leaned back and closed my eyes, pretending for a moment to be Abby. I didn't screw up my face, nor press on my temples. In the moment, I was centred enough to think of only a few things. The low-to-mid volume of discussion, like a chorus out of sync. Mr Fleisher, noticeably absent, almost forgotten. Harmony of breath and heart. Sutton. The closet safe.

Matthew.

I returned to focus when Abby plonked herself down beside me once more and said, 'Where are you going now that the party is getting more festive?' She had a small handful of grapes on the stem in her palm and she meticulously plucked one off before popping it into her mouth.

The green grapes looked sweet, juicy, and plump. Bulbous.

'For a second, I was on vacation with Joe...'

I thought it best not to ask her for one of the grapes.

Abby nodded her head, a rhythmic motion. Sweet peace, for a second. It was not a complete lie—amongst everything, there was a window out to the ocean, to a cruise liner in the middle of the sea, with Joe lounging on a deckchair in just his swimming trunks. Sometimes I had to admit whether I fancied Joe or not. We never really flirted with one another, except for sometimes, when the two of us were exhausted beyond repair, and he would allow me to rest my weighed-down head on his shoulder and he would tell me something that was Joe's version of a flirtatious joke.

I needed to read those books of his, but when my palms hovered above the cover of the first in the pile, I wondered if reading them now would come across as though I was trying too hard to impress him. Joe. A simple, sweet, unconnected-to-everything Joe.

Abby plucked another grape into her mouth and chewed.

The doorbell rang.

Mr Fleisher made a hastened approach to the door of his apartment and let the mysterious guest inside. We hadn't expected another arrival, what with Elisse and Bryton making eyes at one another, Wesley and Isiah making passing remarks about the itchiness of their clothes, Abby and myself sitting on the carpeted floor wishing there was the melodic noise of piano keys in the background. For a second, I thought, *has the man from across the way come to huff about something?* It could be noise, from rambunctious chatter, Bryton's realtor voice carrying through walls, or it could be mundane. A wrong smell. Mr Fleisher might have left a passionate note on the door, too. *You'd be a better neighbour if you didn't let everyone in the building see you in your sagging pyjama bottoms.*

I tried to peer through their heads to get a look at whoever had arrived on Mr Fleisher's doorstep. Ever nosy, ever able to find the smallest crack. Wearing plainclothes again, Matthew scuffed his feet on the welcome mat and waltzed into the dining room, empty-handed. He looked tired. On theme, unexpectedly, although his shoes were black sneakers that he kicked off near the mountain of others.

Expect more interrogation, I thought, glancing over at Abby. She seemed largely unfazed, eating the last of the grapes, the stem-string in her palm. Physical magic, a manifestation of it. Gnarled and barky. 'I trust the boy is being looked after,' Mr Fleisher said, directing the latest guest towards the gathering of neighbours in the living room.

‘He’s with his grandparents,’ Matthew said, mere moments before we made eye-contact. I went to cock my head, in confusion, if anything, but he mouthed a *hello* before Mr Fleisher continued their conversation, albeit redirecting it towards the larger assembly.

‘Everyone, he’s decided to make a proper appearance,’ Mr Fleisher intoned, which was met with all eyes focused upon the new arrival. Matthew suddenly became somewhat unconvinced, waving with one hand, drifting his eyes across the room languidly. ‘Maybe you have seen Matthew in the building.’ I wanted to blurt out a sarcastic, stereotypical, *you’ve got that right*, but it felt weird, or mostly out-of-character to interrupt when Mr Fleisher was only taking a quick breath. ‘Matthew moved into the third-floor apartment when Hannah could no longer raise her own,’ the older man spoke, setting a hand for a moment on Matthew’s shoulder. ‘He is her brother.’

The single mother and her young son.

I’d thought her to be a homebody, frequently ordering groceries to be delivered, surviving off government paychecks and child support from an unseen excuse for a father, but...

No clue what Mr Fleisher meant by her no longer being able to raise the boy.

Matthew waved a handful more hellos and retreated to the platter of meats and cheeses. He piled two crackers together like a miniature sandwich and arched his eyebrows when we, once more, made confusing eye-contact.

He came and squatted down beside me, chewing on his food. With his right hand, he covered his mouth with a mimed visor, making another arched, faux-surprised expression with merely the top half of his face.

‘Let’s talk in the kitchen, please,’ he said, removing the hand so his voice would not be muffled. Abby had returned to fetch herself another string of grapes, and the others, including Mr Fleisher, had begun an elaborate game of *does anything want something to drink?*

Matthew and I walked, one after the other, into the kitchen.

The moment we stepped foot in the kitchen, Matthew set a hand upon my shoulder and moved me into the corner of the room. He was not forceful, or aggressive. He was gentle. But I remained cautious and uncertain.

‘Mr Fleisher is an old fool half the time, but he knew not to go to the police,’ he spoke, in a hushed whisper despite our distance from the other members of the party. ‘We pretended I was a cop only when he knew you were home during the day—everyone else works at that time, so the ruse made sense. Immediately I knew it was careless to deceive you, considering I now live one floor above in the same apartment my sister completely vanished from.’

Matthew froze, staring completely through me. He started to explain what happened to his sister, Hannah. She had lived in the apartment for several months, raising her little boy, when suddenly she vanished without a trace. It wasn’t long before someone reported to check in on Rhys, they found him abandoned in the apartment, but safe and sound regardless. The apartment was not ransacked. No visible signs of the mother having fled, overburdened by motherhood, or barely affording the place on so little of an income and fluctuating child support payments. The father, by the way, was a true piece of work who phoned infrequently attempting to ‘rekindle’ the romance between them, sans caring for the youngster they created together. It made no sense to anyone, but it was agreed, hastily, that for the child’s protection it would be a hushed investigation. Matthew, Hannah’s brother, would care for him and provide any detail he could while everyone more silently searched for Hannah’s whereabouts. Nothing made sense, truthfully. Hannah left everything,

including her housekeys, wallet, and every single physical possession she had kept in the little place she could call home. Nothing made sense.

‘We shouldn’t have lied, or fabricated truths, but I wanted unbiased responses,’ Matthew said, leaning with his butt against the kitchen sink. ‘When Hannah completely disappeared off the face of the earth, I worried that dropkick of an ex had done something extreme, kidnapped her in the middle of the day in broad daylight. But wouldn’t she have had her phone, at least?’

The apartment had not appeared *tainted* in the slightest. No struggle, no sudden, noticeable ambush. Rhy wasn’t distraught, either. Confused, if anything. The look upon Matthew’s face as he recalled these details about his nephew. His energy had dropped.

‘How do you tell anyone a person has vanished, just like that?’

His energy had shifted, and I worried for a moment he would become soap-opera-actor-ish in his confusion and confoundment. An overabundance of emotion, borne to me without complete understanding. *I’m not a main player in all this*, I thought, wondering why I had to have been *at home* while an undercover investigation had to take place. Matthew winced. ‘Sorry,’ he repeated, shaking his head. ‘I haven’t known how to properly be myself since she went. Putting on a mask, it’s easier when all you are covering up is the loss of someone you hoped would outlive you.’ He paused, tipping his head downwards. ‘At least for Rhys. He’s a sweet boy, but does a kid that young’s brain even compute when someone completely vanishes from their orbit? Where does he think his mother has gone?’

I hesitated before I spoke again, wondering if this question was really the first thing I should be saying next. ‘How old is he?’

‘He’s about to be three,’ Matthew said, sighing. ‘Birthday photographs will be void of Hannah from now on, and if that doesn’t fuck up a kid when they glance back at their childhood...’

Matthew paused and blurted out an apology for the cursing.

‘Mr Fleisher sits on the sofa sometimes and whines about his safe, a replaceable thing. Money can be replaced, he’s not a poor bloke, truly not. I listen because I’m not an asshole, but our situations are polar opposite. The man became a little poorer, a little removed from items of *sentimentality*, and yet.’ Matthew was trying to poke and prod with his gaze. ‘My sister is gone and not logically so neither.’

Somehow we navigated ourselves from standing in the kitchen to sitting down on Mr Fleisher’s bed in the bedroom, and Matthew sat with a pillow on his lap. This version of him, emotional, overwhelmed somewhat, broken free of the once-assumptions of plainclothes Officer Matthew whatever-his-last-name-is. I felt strange about being in what remained a crime scene. Equally so, I felt strange about being someone he could confide in.

I hadn’t even mentioned Sutton.

‘I came to this for the old man,’ Matthew continued. ‘He invited me, seeing as I rarely left the apartment upstairs, stressing too much that Rhys, at just about three, was moments away from screaming out for his mum and what the hell would I do?’

He proceeded to explain: Rhys and a selection of belongings had been packed up and he was spending at least a week and a half with his grandparents. Matthew needed the chance to breathe. Why he chose a Mr Fleisher soiree for his first true *outing* was none of my business.

In the bubble of the bedroom, Matthew didn’t burst into welled-up tears. He sat, occasionally stroking the pillow on his lap, and for the most part, maintained eye-contact with me. ‘That kid doesn’t deserve to know the misery of loss, and we say that about every child, sure, but when I look into his face and see the *confusion*, see my sister...’ For a moment, I expected Matthew to never

speaking again. At least not to me. Then: 'Thank you for just sitting here and listening.' He moved the pillow out of his lap and stood up, abruptly so, and paced towards the closed bedroom door. 'The old man is harmless,' he continued from across the room. I'd swivelled my body to look over at him. 'He believes in folklore conspiracy theories and the myth of Bigfoot, that somewhere in a cave the Abominable Snowman is brewing himself, or herself, a cup of cinnamon-dusted hot chocolate to cosy in for the stormfront approaching on the horizon.' Matthew sighed. 'He is the diligent host enough to know none of his neighbours, who he clutches to as the last remnants of a social life, had any possible chance to swipe a heavy, bulky, near-enough-to-being-tied-down safe in the bedroom closet.' At this he gripped the handle of the door and turned it, letting a column of space open up between the wood and the frame.

'He has his beliefs.'

When I returned to the living room, Matthew had excused himself from the apartment. The sneakers were gone. Mr Fleisher was setting the dining room table, with some assistance from Abby and Isiah. On the sofa, Elisse and Bryton were regaling their captive audience of one with a vacation story from a few months ago, when they'd flown the handful of hours from the International Airport to Fiji for ten days. The story, presumably, hadn't vacated from this flight for good reason.

I lingered in the hallway, leaning against Mr Fleisher's walls. He would scold, I am sure, enacting some concern about the pressure of my shoulder leaving an indent on the plaster. Or otherwise that I looked like a teenager again, playing out one of my expected teenage-boy acts. Leaning on the scenery.

Abby and Isiah bumped into one another comically and both apologised at lightning-speed. Mr Fleisher had noticed and shook his head, out of reflex, I can imagine. He made brief eye-contact with me but said nothing. He smiled and suddenly I felt the urge to say something to him: it was a drop-down list of multiple-choice answers, something something cryptids, something something hot cocoa. There was this fruitless craving for the Gustav Klimt to be snatched out of Bryton's hands and filled with warm chocolate and milk. Sugar, sugar. I was starving, all the sudden, too. Thinking about whatever the older man had prepared for dinner. Seemingly I hadn't noticed a thing in the kitchen. All must be tucked away, snuck into the refrigerator. Hiding in the oven.

We ate. We laughed, although infrequently in response to a misunderstood generational joke from Mr Fleisher. Abby's face brightened with every bite of the food from her plate, and I whispered under my breath, 'You're having a frabjous time?' and she cackled loud enough to startle Isiah while he checked his phone underneath the dining table. When I cornered him about this later, he revealed Noe was showing interest again, although he predicted it would be fleeting.

I'll be just the same level of bothered, he said. Whether I believed him or not, who could tell.

Mr Fleisher did not surprise us with another murder mystery while we slurped on the soup. [It was delicious soup, although the older man muttered he was avoiding unnecessary carbs, so everyone pretended to not be irritated at the lack of oversized slices of bread for dipping.]

Elisse and Bryton fed each other spoonfuls of soup in between fits of laughter.

I dreaded going back to work the next evening.

I texted Joe.

Only about vacation plans.

We needed to make some more things official.

That night, I had an awful, terrible dream. I pictured myself in one of the dreadful lifeboats, specific in era to that of the sinking of the Titanic. Underordered, cramped, my shoulder slamming against the shoulder of a stewardess who, amidst the violent rocking, introduced herself as Sue. *Women and children first, though?* I shouted out to no one in particular, knowing I was still in the same body, albeit thrummed back in time to 1912.

In the lifeboat, I reckoned with my guilt. It was apparent to me that in securing this space on a lifeboat otherwise crammed with female staff, I'd made favour with someone despicable. Sudden flashback, I was in the quarters of a higher-ranking crewmember, placing down bank note after bank note on the floor of the cabin. In total, the sum would be substantial for the 1910s. The notes collated together to form a picture, a green-tinged portrait of a woman's face. She was in her twenties, perhaps late-twenties, but she had no eyes. Craters in the skin. The other crewmember claps me on the same shoulder.

In the lifeboat, Sue was cash-money green, ballooning her gums. She lurched forward, a seasick hen, and I thought to myself, in a waking dream, she will vomit in my lap.

When I stirred awake and could only stare at the ceiling, I didn't so much think about Sue as I did about Matthew. He would be upstairs, I presumed, or otherwise lost in a drunken state someplace else, if I knew grief like I did. Strange how feeling sorry for someone can be translated so easily into feeling caught off-guard by someone. Emotional tugboats.

I sat on the floor in my living room, nursing a mug of microwaved milk.

Abby left a note on the kitchen counter, sticky-taped down. In it, she wrote a simple message:

Roomie,

[she rarely called me Hale]

Sometimes I think about moving my belongings to work and hiding a mattress in one of the many storage rooms I cannot imagine anyone else entering except me. This, I predict, is how you see me sometimes: the girl who exists for her occupation, not the occupation that exists for the girl.

My depression when I have to sieve myself from the job is not comfortable, I know. I act like there is a piece of me missing when I don't feel useful, don't feel productive and mastering the art of being an Adult Human Being. Well, for this long we've both nuzzled up to Mr Burden the schnauzer, our unapproved house pet. Think of the landlords!

I left the apartment early this morning [5:20am] to go walk along the river and do my version of screaming into the abyss, which is whispering when I realise there aren't any humans anywhere nearby and my music is loud enough in my ears for me to not be bothered at all.

I don't imagine anything will change, because I love my job.

- Abby

I think I was becoming tired of all this being-miserable.

I hesitated on sending her a message, a same-length response. We could begin a back-and-forth dialogue about what prompted this, whether something Mr Fleisher had said to her last night

in private had impacted her more profoundly than I thought possible. But I changed my mind, left the note taped down to the kitchen counter, and popped two slices of white bread into the toaster.

The sound of the television was a muffled groan from the upstairs apartment.

Somehow I had gotten a few more hours of sleep and completely missed Abby. Part of me wondered when I would talk to her next. A proper, lucid conversation. Part of me hoped she got distracted by the voice of Kate Miller-Heidke and started hurling out not-to-be-understood words in another language entirely. That she had found a ledge somewhere, entirely by the magic and a sentence of the foot, and at the same moment Kate sung *'let me wrap you up against the cold'*, Abby created words in gibberish no one will ever hear again.

I buttered the toast. Hovered with a piece in my hand. A corner making a lowercase 'c' with the bitemarks. I had work in the evening, but I thought about calling in sick. They require no sicknotes from a doctor, no confirmation you're under the weather. They offer no sincere *get better soon's*, certainly not if Carmen were to answer the phone.

Do you think a television detective would make quick work of anything?

I think about what it would be like to be friendly with Hercule Poirot, not for the air and the lure of death surrounding him, but for the frequent reassurance of his company. Things to be solved, and they will. Twist of the moustaches and not so sinisterly.

Joe's name flashes onto the face of my phone.

This beautiful idiot will call me whenever he damn feels like it.

I think of answering, *no, Joe, I haven't even lifted the cover of one of the books.*

I'm not sick so much as I'm afflicted.

Mr Fleisher could not remember the specific date he moved into the building. Yes, he could find the paperwork filed away somewhere, the information what-have-you somewhere in the system, but regardless of fact, there was memory. Mr Fleisher maintained he could not remember whether it was a Monday or a Friday, or whether it was at the start of the month or the close. Information, he believed, to be irrelevant to his *stay*. His residence, it was not defined by the opening, but the meanwhile. Those Sunday nights when he gathered the people from the building, except the one person he strongly disliked in it, and the single mother, Hannah, who until recently had been an exact mystery. She kept to herself. Suddenly she was a *confusing* mystery. Playing in repetition on Rhys' face. Part of me considered whether Matthew would benefit more from not being the guardian to a three-year-old kid who couldn't meet the *adults'* understanding of god-knows.

The cryptids.

Then, I couldn't quite say if Rhys' grandparents could comprehend anything either.

Joe said this time in a month and a half we would be sipping out of glass bottles of pineapple-flavoured soft drink and leaving the hotel room at 7am in the morning to catch a one-hour bus to someplace in the middle of nowhere. Or, or, to catch a fifteen-minute ferry across the river. We would spend the days and nights together, and I would say certain things, hide certain things. In the luggage I would nestle some of his books between layers of clothing and after an exhausting day on our feet, Joe and I would sit underneath the bulb of a hotel room floor lamp and read. He will poke my legs and laugh when I only half-grumpily tell him to cut it out.

When I left the apartment the morning of the letter from Abby, Elisse was standing in her opened doorway. She paused, wiping a tear from her cheek, before shouting out to Bryton

somewhere beyond the threshold. 'And now I'm embarrassing myself in front of Hale.' Politely, Elisse attempted a wordless apology, sticking her head inside the apartment.

'I can't find my phone!' Bryton screamed back, his voice noticeably shaky.

Elisse's eyes went wide. The expression upon her face suggested this sudden exclamation merely tipped her overboard. She couldn't be this unsettled because Bryton had misplaced his phone, but then...

'It was under the couch cushion,' he interjected, coming towards the entrance to their apartment with the black rectangle in his hand. He nodded a hello to me, although his expression, too, remained pained and flushed. Bryton began to scroll down through a list of contacts, tapping repeatedly on the screen once he located the real estate agent for the building.

All the while, I said not one word.

'Yes, hi, it's Bryton Maleki. Our bathroom door vanished overnight. Yeah, fucking explain that!' Off his frustrated expression, I offered a head tilt and an exaggerated frown. 'I'll calm my language, alright, but help me understand how Elisse and I can wake up this morning and not be able to get into the bathroom because the door has just completely vanished.'

I froze, undoubtedly going pale. Elisse inched toward me, lowering her voice. 'Come take a look, it makes no sense at all.' We squeezed past Bryton, who continued to argue the necessity of his tone alongside the severity of the situation. Down the hall, where an obvious door should have been, Elisse tapped the beige-coloured wall. 'Now what the fu—'



White nothingness for a while, at least. Empty horizons, the smell of potential. Weakening, unfortunately, as smells often do. Two women in their twenties shared a medium-sized cube, black in colour. They made small talk amongst themselves.

‘Well this is boring,’ one said, looking at nothing in particular.

The other had a quivering lip. ‘Try again soon to find something else?’ She said, making a subtle gesture with her hands. Beyond their metal box as chair-substitute, a variety of other items were sprawled out without any particular sense of organisation. An assorted bowl of house-and-car-keys. A thick blue-cover binder. A work laptop. An urn of Grandmother’s Ashes. A judge’s wig. One of those four-legged, cage-structure walkers. A letter marked Return to Sender.

‘My feet hurt,’ the first one replied, slipping off her shoe down onto what constituted as “*the floor*”. The same colour white, a tad lifeless, if the two women were honest.

The other woman sighed and averted her eyes from the socked foot. ‘I know tired,’ she said, sighing. ‘I should be home, making sure my boy isn’t waking in the middle of the night thinking the Bogeyman is at the foot of his bed trying to suck out his soul.’ She shifted her butt on the half of the closet safe she was perched upon. ‘You’re worried if we walk too far away from here, we’re absolutely stuffed if one of us needs to go to the toilet.’

At that, a door slammed shut, and a certain distance from the two women, a man exited the sole structure on this plane of existence. Instead of drying his hands on a hand towel, he shook them aggressively as he meandered back towards the half-vacated junkyard.

‘Alvin,’ the second woman continued, jerking her head. ‘Can’t you leave the bathroom alone? We only have so much toilet paper.’ She knew she was sounding like a mother, but alas, it came with the territory. Babying a grown man wasn’t necessarily the most compelling use of her skills.

Alvin sighed, as he was wont to do, and returned to rummaging through the antique glass bowl which contained the assortment of keys. None would be useful, although he still persistently hoped one would unlock the safe. A safe which required a code, not a key. He wanted his prize, if this would be his eternity.

‘I am having the time of my life,’ the first woman sarcastically groaned.

Someone’s silver 1982 Peugeot 505 blipped into existence on the plane.

Or, knife-twistingly, blipped out of it.