

Backpack Backpack

by Keeley Young

I was nervous. I met them on the sidewalk outside of the nearest train station, and they were friendly enough. I didn't say much, so they didn't say much. Someone I had known in school had reached out one afternoon, asking if there was still the room in the back of my place, that a couple could stay in when they returned to the country. She hadn't said how long they would stay, or where they had come from. They came from out of the country, is all. They were people who squinted—first, to find me, idling on the corner wearing a white baseball cap and slobbered in sunscreen, then, second, as we wandered off down a path in the opposite direction to the central town.

'How long have you lived out this way?' He asked, the taller of the two. They both looked in their thirties, hadn't packed hats, and squirted cream out of the tube as they walked the first part of the trail. She carried the larger of the packs.

'A couple years now,' I replied, stepping over a jutting rock. The trail was a comfortable hike to my house, although I only frequented it for work, supplies, and the occasional appointment with the local doctor. A typical, clean bill of health, mostly.

It was the middle of summer and I had left the air-conditioning running while I met with them. There was nothing more I craved than escaping back inside, putting my feet up on an ottoman, and closing my eyes. We skirted past a small stream and Denis pointed out a brown bird perched in the trees. It was silent, mostly, not frenzied like other birds typically are. His partner, Kat, gave it a nod of recognition and kept moving forward. I sensed if he had a camera on him, Denis would have stooped or perched himself on a rock and lined up the perfect shot. Found the right composition, or at least frozen stiff for a minute or so, unfazed by a jib from Kat.

'Thank you for putting us up,' she said, as we eased down a sharp decline. The house was in what could have been considered a gully, although when I purchased it, the realtor had simply classified it as "a picturesque pocket of the region". I had no close neighbours, although sometimes I waved to Erin when she passed the place taking a walk in the woods. The ground evened out and Kat readjusted the straps on her backpack, smiling at me as I patiently waited for them both to catch up. Her hair was darker in the woods, somehow. Compromised by the shadows. I had said they were very welcome to stay with me—I rarely had overnight visitors. I wasn't in the habit of finding someone interested.

They spoke very little of their decade-long stay out of the country, except that it wasn't a vacation, at least not in simple terms. They had holidays here and there, exploring, enjoying the change of pace. Words that lingered made the experience sound incredible, but unpredictable, too. Denis paused to retie his shoelaces at one point, and he glanced up at me with a toothy grin and said, 'You'd

be surprised by how similar certain things are.’ He never said where it was they lived. Somewhere foreign, I assumed, but they never mentioned even the slightest clue. I could have journeyed somewhere myself with a mention of what they ate at mealtimes—I felt like a small child, clinging to cadences, waiting for Denis to slip up and say, *I’m sick of rice by now, I think*. When I spied the roof of my house, I posed a question to them both, a true cheeky schoolboy: ‘Is there anything you’ve been craving since you landed back here?’ He said, *everything you’ve got in the pantry would suit the both of us, I’d think*.

I fumbled around in my pocket for the key and quickly unlocked the door. They seemed antsy to get inside. Kat wiped sweat off her forehead and sighed the moment she felt the cool air-conditioning. I pointed them down the hall for the bathroom, the guest bedroom they would be sleeping in, and my own bedroom. ‘Wake me in the middle of the night if you have to, but don’t be startled if I’m rubbing my eyes with a startled panic, and if I’m sleeping in the nude.’ Denis and Kat laughed, heaving their backpacks off their shoulders. I immediately hid my attempt at a joke by offering them both glasses of ice-cold water. Sleeping naked is the sort of thing you feel completely at ease with when there’s no one around to notice you.

For half an hour, I heard very little from the two of them. I brewed myself a tea in the kitchen, staring out into the garden as a crow patrolled in a loose oval shape. There wasn’t too much to the garden, really. Some trees planted by the previous owners. A garden shed the size of the bathroom. A bird bath. I would go out in the morning and refill the bath if it had dried up, on mornings I remembered to check it. Denis knocked on the door frame and asked what else there was to drink. Wine, tea, water, I said, offering to pour him a glass or a mug of something. ‘No beer?’ He said, shrugging. ‘I stopped liking beer a few years ago, thank god, but I thought it would be funny if we cheersed over two beers to celebrate us being back home.’ He used the word like it truly had been a simple vacation, ten years long. *Home*. I’d hoped he didn’t mean to permanently move in.

In the freezer I fetched two ice cubes from a tray and slammed the door shut, albeit a fraction too flimsily. When I glanced back at Denis, a sort of apology, he laughed it off and held his hand out, accepting the glass. I poured red wine from the bottle I uncorked last night, apologised if he expected freshly-uncorked wine for this sort of celebration. My friend had said, in a series of messages, not to make miraculous their return. Treat them like new, brief tenants, please, she’d typed, before sending me a picture of the two. Denis had looked taller, then. Heat can shrink a person. Kat had worn sunglasses in the picture and she was how I realised the photo was likely from a decade ago. There was an unmistakable ease to her, which reminded me of looking at high school-age pictures of my sister.

With the glass of wine, Denis wandered around the living room, glancing at rectangular portraits of my family, an eleven-year-old dog I lost before moving out here, and myself, dressed in cap and gown, graduating from university. ‘I thought about studying, being trapped in school for longer,’

he said, holding the picture frame in his right hand. 'What did you study?' With the wine in his left, he took a swig, making it known his pleasure in the act. I would be remiss to not consider how attractive Denis was, despite the worn-down expression seemingly permanent from whatever occupation he held outside of the country, or perhaps, from simply the extended stay itself. He set the graduation photograph down and made for the armchair. 'I studied English Literature,' I replied, expecting him to wonder why I was no longer in some lecture hall, unpacking thematic overtures and what the author meant when they described a certain tableau, or the upturned inflection of a character's voice. Denis, from the armchair, nodded his head. *A big reader, then, you'll have to recommend me some new reads.*

I suggested I could get up and flick through my record collection, see if anything piqued his interest. It would have been a slip of the tongue, but I almost asked him if he'd listened to the same sort of music over the course of the last ten years. Maybe, with so little information, I was assuming he and Kat had been sheltered in African communities, dedicated to supporting the starving, the dehydrated, and the unhoused. I desperately wanted to crawl off the sofa, out of my skin, and worm into his ear canal and scream for something. Some inkling. Tell me where you have been, give an outpouring of overshared stories and overwhelm the finger of the turntable. I kept to my polite self and stood in the opposite corner of the room, thumbing through the limited collection I'd brought with me on the move out here. A handful of *The Supremes* records. Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*. Carole King's *Tapestry*. I wondered if he questioned each vinyl I showcased to him. I wondered what his favourite song was, and if somehow conjuring it for the record player would reinvigorate him even a smidgen.

Kat wandered into the living room while Denis danced, or at least made an attempt to. It was slowed-down arms and swaying hips, and the music and the red wine was loosening him up. *But you're so far away // doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore.* It was obvious by her frazzled appearance that she'd been napping, and I was grateful at least she felt some sort of comfort in the place. Or else she was the type of person to sleep anywhere, which had to be refreshing for these walls to see. Kat meandered towards Denis' almost empty wine glass and swigged down the remnants of it. 'My mother likes music like this...' she said, then, hesitating, 'This song reminds me of agreeing to leave Australia.'

As the album was swung from Side A to Side B, Denis and Kat sat side by side on the loveseat, barely looking at one another. I suppose I expected them to be all lovey-dovey with one another. I expected his arm draped around her shoulders. Her palm caressing his bare knee. A quick, passionate peck when I mentioned the beauty of a couple standing by one another over the course of such an extended period where everything is unfamiliar, unsettled, and, probably, with a language barrier he began only partly versed in, and she had been half-fluent in. In the strange silence, I found the courage to ask them: 'How far did you have to travel to return here?'

I should have said: *is there some reason you hadn't the money to afford a hotel room in the city?*

‘Far,’ Kat said, billowing out her exhaustion. I figured the nap only recharged her to a certain point, and her indifference to him beside her made sense. She was just too worn down to give him the sort of attention you assumed would come, out of the heat, on solid ground. ‘The flight felt double the length they told us initially, I couldn’t sleep much on it, everything was too loud. The engine sounded like someone’s heartbeat thumping right up against my ear.’ Beside her, Denis had quite the reserved reaction—it was wordless, almost soundless, and featured an adjustment of his grip on the arm of the sofa. He glanced over at me, and I wondered if for some reason he felt like part of what she’d said was about him. His eyebrows arched unnaturally high, and he gestured towards the wine glass, too. Nothing he said had any real relation to drinking alcohol, however.

‘Have you ever thought about visiting Norway?’

‘Did you live in Norway?’ I asked, hopeful.

‘Oh, no,’ Denis said, shaking his head. ‘I visited before I met Kat, when I was fifteen.’ He mouthed, sharply, but politely, I suppose: *can you refill my glass?* Then he grinned. ‘Norway is beautiful,’ he continued, as I rose from the armchair and fetched the bottle from the kitchen. ‘You make a valid point though, at least. I could have lived two decades in Norway if I were prompted to, but if you can believe it, we’d moved somewhere even more exotic than Norway.’

Kat whispered something I didn’t catch as I wandered back into the living room with the bottle. I began pouring into his glass, waiting for him to tell me when to stop. He mouthed, *we’ll share it*, half-heartedly, then told me to stop pouring before the glass overflowed. ‘Norway isn’t very exotic,’ Kat said, swiping the glass before her partner could even bend forward for it. ‘White people, almost completely, so I would stand out like a redhead in Japan.’ She swilled the wine, before raising it to her nostrils for a whiff. They didn’t act as if they had been unable to have even seen a droplet of wine in their sabbatical overseas, and yet, Kat seemed at least somewhat entranced by it.

I think she probably craved getting tipsy.

When the glass was almost emptied, Denis rose to his feet and asked for a reminder where the bathroom was. I told him again, it was the next door past the one to the guest bedroom, and he acted suddenly like he had made the most foolish error in forgetting something like that. ‘Oh, duh!’ he said, disappearing from the living room, humming *Beautiful* by Carole King to himself. A melody floated. I’d completely forgotten the uncomfortable heat outside. Half an hour or so earlier the mutual friend who had brokered this whole arrangement, Olivia, had texted me to ask if they were settling in well. I’d considered asking them if they could pose like it were a volatile, silly, hostage situation, faux-nervousness and rope-bound arms, as the sort of prank I hoped Olivia would immediately call me about.

That was the reason I scratched the idea out completely. Plus, it was disturbing to consider.

A few hours passed. Denis called out my name from the guest room, at one point, and I wandered towards the sound of his voice, carrying a plate of cheese and crackers. They weren't for my guests. Denis lay sprawled out on the bed, bespeckled with a pair of square reading glasses. There wasn't a book in sight. I assumed he'd been reading something on his phone, amidst scrolling through ordinary posts about adopting dogs, most likely. Denis noticed the plate and got distracted. He shook himself free of it, but his eyes continued to wander. 'Can I borrow a novel?'

I wanted desperately to decline him. I thought of the book tumbling into the heavy rucksack of his, the front cover bent achingly in the wrong direction. Raindrops finding each and every page. Or, otherwise, I would loan a novel I treasure and there would be not once a mention of it again. Completely thrown to the void. Missing in action. Instead, I ushered Denis back into the living room and became museum curator again, giving an enthusiasm-thrusting tour of my novel collection. Hesitantly, Denis made his selection and brushed his hand against mine. It was almost as if I expected him to grasp it. Without reason. It was all completely off a vibe and I felt so incredibly disgusted by myself.

'Thank you,' he said, turning away from me.

Denis lingers like a stalking grey crowned crane.

'I want so desperately to sleep in anyone else's bed but hers.'

He carried the book in his right hand and crept back into the guest bedroom.

Forlorn, miserable, draping like fabric pulled off curtain rods.

Denis and Kat didn't appear like a happy couple at dinner. Denis carved into the clumsy mattress of lasagna without asking questions about whether I had made anything by scratch (I had not) or whether I enjoyed cooking (I did) or whether I often had guests to cook for (no, of course not). Kat didn't seem very hungry at all. She would slice thin julienned portions of the lasagna like she was in a prestigious sort of restaurant, and her first question came when I offered her a piece of garlic bread. 'Have you thought about moving back to the city much?' I had mentioned earlier, on the walk, that most of my family lived three hours from here, nearer to the skyscrapers that had only made me nauseous.

'I was too depressed in my old life,' I replied, before tearing into the bread with my teeth. 'Not to say the depression has completely evaporated in the wilderness...I don't know, I don't miss being surrounded by human faces twenty-four seven. Bird faces they squawk, not speak.'

They gawked at me. I thought, here is the moment I quickly smoothen over the edges of mentioning mental health problems proudly with the full of my chest. Blame the wine, none of which

had been poured into my glass that evening. Denis wiped a puddle of deep crimson sauce with the bread. 'I know depression,' he murmured, shooting his partner a short glance.

Theirs was a game on a schedule—he would give her a curt smile, and she would select the strategy that suited. When I asked them both what they clung to, now, back in the country they grew up in...the thing they wanted to reach in and uncover again, like lounging out on a blue striped towel at a true-blue Australian beach, or visiting one of the theme parks, they both stared at me. Denis posed; Kat cocked her head. 'Neither of us has a car,' one of them said, but I cannot be sure which. It held the same tone a grieving person held when someone spoke out of turn at the funeral. *No, I'm in a state of shock, my husband is dead, why would you ask me something like that?* I wanted to ring out this tension like it were a saturated hand towel, over the bathroom sink. Suds burrowing underneath my fingernails. A glance at my reflection in the mirror, and I've got an amalgamation of their faces transmorphed over the flesh. His raised eyebrows. Her pursed lips. 'It wouldn't be something like a fifteen-minute drive to the beach, really.' Again. It was one of them.

I rinsed each plate in the sink, waiting for some polite chatter in the distance behind me from them. They seemed adverse to bothering one another, and I remember thinking, here is a reason to be grateful for your loneliness. There. There's the depression again, seeping in from underneath the floorboards. When I inevitably woke up too early in the morning, I could do the dishes while a million new thoughts drummed around in my head. Denis and Kat lounged in the living room, listening to a different record. I briefly erased them from their positions and saw the room as it should've been—vacant, mute, reminiscent of a cool breeze nowhere near a plummet off a cliff. Denis was reading tracklists from the flipside of vinyl casings, making quiet *hms* when he recognised a popular song hidden amongst other titles. Kat rested her feet on an ottoman and called out to me, her voice raised, despite the fact I stood a few feet away from her in the doorway.

'Jacob?' I stepped forward, summoned. 'How far can the trains take me from here?' She began a short bit of an explanation: she wanted to spend the next day trying to look for a place, and maybe something to do for work while she settled back into a different routine, as it were. She knew she didn't have much cash, in general, but as soon as she got back in contact with her family again, and some generous friends in the city, she would be back on her feet enough to afford a month or so of rent. Never in her meticulous outline did she mention what Denis would be doing. I think she would have settled for an apartment with a cramped single bed shoved against the wall. He factored not at all, and wordlessly, I stopped referring to them as a couple. Denis and Kat, but not Denis & Kat. I explained the train would eventually get her to the city, but she knew that, having come from the airport. Kat lifted her head and chuckled. *I hadn't been focusing properly then*, she had mused, glancing bleakly at Denis.

Once she had squirreled the important information out of me, Kat left the men in the living room. It wasn't long before I heard the abrupt stream of the shower, and Denis glanced at me as if to say, *she's calling it a night then*. I wasn't opposed to spending the rest of my night with him. There was a certain nervousness, though, because I had become so accustomed to being by myself, alone, talking to an invisible audience if I had to. An audience that had no reaction, no judgement reserved or not. I remember trying to piece together a conversation tactic from the mosaic of Denis' eyes, and the way he slightly adjusted his position on the sofa. His hands.

'Thank you for letting us stay,' he said, remorsefully.

I only half-understood the way he spoke, then. 'When I moved in, I assumed I was furnishing a room with no purpose. I could have turned it into a second study, or just made it a room for awful clutter and storage. But the previous owner left some furniture, like the bed frame, and...for whatever reason, I felt compelled to buy a new mattress for it.'

'It's a comfortable mattress,' he continued, arching his back forward to rest his arms on his thighs. 'Kat and I stopped speaking much to each other, what, almost two months ago. Seven weeks.' I'd thought there was slight chance he'd cry, but he wiped his eyes on his sleeve. 'We fought, we probably fought, steadily, for three weeks before that. It's exhausting as hell to grow, over time, so irreparably mad at the person you once loved. Kat wanted to go home. I wanted to convince myself I should stay. There wasn't much inviting me back here, to Australia.'

I was stumbling on how to approach it, how to say something that would suit the reaction he expected from me. Did he want to be comforted, or told he made the right decision? Did he hope I would find the validity in both of their actions, or just his? Instinctively, I thought about rising out of my seat, taking the few steps over to him, and nestling beside him in an attempt to be the warmth he might've also been longing for. I fidgeted in the armchair and asked him how he felt, having returned now, with Kat willing to assume the relationship was over—Denis glanced at me, relieved, I think, that I hadn't tried to assure him he could be the seamstress that patched together their disaster of avoidance.

'You have a lovely home,' he said, taking in his surroundings once again. In lamplight, Denis did look like a barn owl, almost rotating his head right around his entire body. His movements were still hesitant. Now his stare returned to me. 'I'm going to sleep on this couch tonight, I can sleep anywhere, please don't try to convince me otherwise, really.' There was something reassuring about his tone—it was probably the most welcoming Denis had been all day, and I simply nodded my head, scanning a mental image of the linen closet down the hall for everything I could offer him to make the night's sleep more comfortable. Somehow I figured Kat wouldn't even notice. Denis patted the empty space beside him. I went to bed an hour later.

I had barely kept a journal since moving away from everything, but underneath an eye of light I dug around in the bedside table for a brown-and-gold book I kept as nondescript as possible. I wrote, at first, about meeting them at the train station. Kat had swatted the heat away with her palm, as if it were a nosy horsefly. They were both dressed for a longer journey, and I immediately clocked how sweaty their arms and legs would be by the time we reached the house. Kat paused outside the train station, gesturing to a small building in distance. ‘Can I change someplace?’ she had asked, beginning to unzip her backpack. She withdrew a pair of shorter pants and waved them around like a mopey flag, all energy beaten out of it by the wind. I told her there was a toilet block a little further into town, and she scrunched her face up, wondering, I assume, how far *a little further* would be. Denis didn’t speak much. He nodded in agreement, adjusting his own backpack as we wandered down the old, fading road. While Kat changed in the public restroom, he leaned heavier on his left foot and said, ‘They give you nothing to eat. On the, uh, plane, I mean. We didn’t have money to spend on in-flight food or anything. We had to save the last of it for the train ride out into the middle of damn nowhere.’ Denis gave me the sort of look that said *I’m not trashing your community, man, but really, the only person willing to help us on the first day back in the country lives, say, \$40 away from the airport.*

Neither of them questioned how out of the way the house was to my face. If they were wondering whether I plotted to tie them to exposed piping and leave them for dead, or worse, torture them, they did not say a word about it. Of course, they barely spoke to one another at all. Kat poked around the garden with a charming sort of curiosity, when I opened the back door in the midst of a tour. She beckoned me over with a smile and pointed to a messy cluster of overgrown weeds. ‘When I was younger, I loved being in the yard, yanking out the gross plants my parents told me were the weeds.’ She bent down, in a squatting position. ‘May I?’ I nodded. Kat pulled sharply on the first of the weeds, dirt and dried mud sprinkling out of the ground. She coughed into her shoulder, laughing, softly. ‘Sorry, some dirt went into my mouth.’

The journal entry felt skewed. I was judgemental, cruel, mocking the collapse of their relationship as if it happened before my eyes, and not two months earlier. But then, I was blatant and distant, too, making little notes about the certain ways they had both treated me, like minute dissections of how I presented myself. How people felt, standing opposite me. How they wanted to react to my hospitality, to my curiosity, to the clean sheets in the spare bedroom and the opened wine bottle in the refrigerator. I thought about aggressively tearing the piece of paper out and starting from scratch, but that felt too performative, like I would be doing it purely for them. Expecting them to rise

out from where they've hunkered down and come following the rustle of paper, to catch the act. Look, there he is, trying to save our feelings while we mourn a ten-year relationship.

Morosely, I wondered if it had been dead for longer.

I switched off the light and stayed, stiff, in one uncomfortable position, staring at something in the corner of the room. It was a shadow, nothing more, but I imagined far more from it.

For the first night in a while, I was fully dressed in bed. There was no fear one of them would knock on the bedroom door and intrude, but I startled myself to think that night of all nights would be the time my peculiar body would choose to get up and stalk the halls while I wasn't conscious at all for it. At least I didn't sweat a drop. I had the duvet pulled to my throat, nestled underneath my chin, and I kept myself awake thinking about the sliding doors gearing open on a different Denis and Kat waiting at the train station. His head resting on her shoulder. Her grin unmistakable. They make cute, flirtatious remarks and swerve with each other as a car careens down the old, fading road. While Kat changes in the public toilet block, Denis barely takes his eyes off the blue-and-clay building and says, 'We should go to the beach together, the three of us. Pack a picnic, maybe. Caw out like seagulls.'

Maybe I found an hour or so of solace in sleep, but I gently and as quietly as possible opened the bedroom door then and tip-toed down the hall towards the kitchen. I wanted a glass of water, and I would get it in the bleeding darkness, fumbling around for the cabinet first, then the tap at the sink. Behind me came a hushed, groggy voice. 'Jacob?' I squinted into the darkness leading into the living room and saw the outline of Denis' shape as he approached me. He was slow, restrained, but eager, too. He wore the white shirt he had carried with him into the bathroom, and a pair of checkered black-and-white underwear. 'Don't rush straight back to bed.'

I lingered unnaturally in the kitchen, sipping from the glass of water. Denis was outlined by moonlight. He suggested to flick a light on, but I shook my head, then whispered low enough for only him to hear, *no, it should be fine*. A light would slam me awake and I couldn't imagine myself simply drifting back asleep beyond that. I downed the last mouthful of water, setting the glass down on the counter, and with a sort of sense memory about things I traced my usual steps from the counter to the loveseat. I'd accidentally kicked Denis' foot, but he made little noise, fumbling in the darkness for my hand. It was considerate, more than anything. In the darkness, he found confessional. A pair of ears that weren't hers. Denis wasted no time.

'There are only so many attempts at an apology you can make before you start to feel the apology is cold, dead on arrival,' he said. 'I think we are both so drained of one another.'

Denis drew an illustration of the two of them once, and the two of them now. He accentuated her visible scorn, he mimicked the sort of mime he had become, not a rather enjoyable one, but a successful one. The mime you would see on the sidewalk of a bustling street, gathering stray tips. Grinning from ear to ear behind a shroud, a door, and then, withstanding without any elation or joy, too. He'd lost Kat. And in a foreign place, too. If he were a father, he would be a spanked one.

'That's how I saw myself. Wasting away in a relationship, but thriving everywhere else.'

He paused.

'I agreed it was time we came home, but the process of packing up what little we could bring back, and getting everything in order, and...doing all of this without speaking a word to Kat, it knocked the wind out of me.' He sought out my eyes. 'A stranger asks little of the questions that are resoundingly rude and impolite...that's my way of saying I am gracious to you, Jacob.' I couldn't figure out why he worded things in such a way, unless he hoped to avoid yet another thank you. It was nice, to hear words not completely butchered. To not hear gruff amalgamations of words, or text-speak. Maybe he was trying to charm me, having seen the growing library, but it hardly mattered. I was already charmed, strangely by them both. That might have come from their distance, their subtlety. For a few hours in the day the house had felt like itself a library, and I had been in complete peace.

I had almost said, you're welcome here for as long as you need, but I hesitated. Muddled it over, realising it could be like offering him a roommate application without realising it. I valued so much my loneliness, my solitude, and I couldn't understand the sedation that was coming over me to simply avoid more torn suffering for Denis. Instead, I said: 'I'm glad I could help out.' I felt the cold rising inside me, remembering a memory from when I was younger, when I'd helped sort through the old belongings of a dead aunt, and her sister glanced to me and said, *thank you for all of this, you might not understand just how much of a grace this has been for us*. She half-gestured to her husband, and her son, who was eleven years older than I was. I had frozen, although not physically, as the corners of my lips twitched, and my fingers felt around in the air as if looking for something to grapple onto. I should have said: 'I'm glad I could help out'. Instead, I didn't speak, and I understand now it was because I didn't realise anything I had done throughout the day had been all that worthy of celebration, of thanking. I'd sorted through oversized cardboard boxes, opened the drawers of antique chestnut dressers, and distracted myself, at one point, making stupid conversation with my adult cousin in the bathroom. He'd asked me if I'd ever kissed someone, and started on a too-much-information story about sticking his tongue down a girl's throat when he was fourteen. I'd thought, *I did what I was told, then took a break*. Maybe I was surprised to be receiving any sort of gratitude from a woman who typically paid me very little attention and relegated me often to being *one of the kids* at the family reunions. I was thirteen, but she had almost noiselessly been a cruel aunt to me since I had known her.

Denis set a hand upon my shoulder. 'Kat and I will get out of the way soon enough, out of your way, and out of each other's.' He shook his head, and I couldn't recognise the expression on his face as he turned away from me. In the darkness of that living room, Denis was drifting away, but he'd constructed his raft out of boomerangs. He was Australian born and raised, after all. 'You'll have this proper escape from the trash of everything to yourself again, because you don't need our trash.'

If I knew how best to comfort him...

I reassured Denis he was not putting me out, as best I could without sounding too artificial. I thought of the quiet mornings where the only thing thrusting me out of bed was the need to use the toilet. This caused me to freeze up, tense, stare off into the distance of the darkened room as if each pocket of pure black stretched on and on. A confusing rush into a tunnel system. I bet they both wondered what I did for work, to afford to live in an all-natural bubble. I had been taking a few weeks of leave at that point, completely unrelated to Denis and Kat's arrival, but typically I worked short shifts in town, in the post office. They paid well. I also wrote romance novels under a pseudonym and sold them online.

'What are you going to do with yourself now?'

Denis glanced at me, our faces inching closer by the minute. He was clearly conflicted, but the moonlight pulled tricks on me. Sometimes I was certain he cried a few tears; other times I couldn't tell the difference between a droplet of water and a freckle. 'I'll probably spend a few months living with my brother, at least,' he said, leaning into the backrest of the loveseat. 'Comb through real estate listings for something of my own, hopeless, listless.' At this he smirked, and I squinted to be sure. 'Eventually I'll find a small place, an apartment or a unit, which I'll share with a grumpy son of a bitch who complains I don't vacuum the place correctly. Then I will be on my feet. Some feet.'

He was painting a picture, but of course the arts and crafts supplies store was out of all the bright, luminescent colours. I saw him there in the sparsely-decorated living room of a two-bedroom apartment, forcing the elephant-trunk vacuum underneath the sofa. He's berated a little. He thinks about the last time Kat squealed out his name, told him to navigate it further in, until he slammed up against the wall and skirting. I feel queasy, thinking about how accurate of a life it will be. Back in this country, Denis had not much of anything leftover—no house, no job, and no Kat.

Yet I barely knew him.

It was the equivalent of overhearing someone's ordinary-day woes in line at the supermarket. The most I felt qualified to offer is the roof over Denis' head, for now, until we both felt like strangers encroaching on one another, or otherwise became too familiar. One morning he would walk in on me in the shower and I would feel embarrassed until he booked another train ticket. One morning I would

realise it wasn't so horrible having more company in a person's life. I could be sitting in the kitchen enjoying having a roommate all of the sudden.

Denis and I spoke for a while, although I would catch myself beginning to blink too often, desperate to stay lucid, focused. I fidgeted in my spot, then spoke, 'I'm going to see if I can get more sleep.' I could hear the mattress from down the hall, soft pillows making whimpering noises.

'You don't have to sleep out here on the couch, though,' I said.

I had a strange dream I was on the street I grew up in, or at least the street where I made memories for eight years of my childhood. Think suburban, but comfortable, the sort of area that boasted about the walking distance to a few local schools that had reputable reputations within the state. We lived in a two-storey place, and when I was nine I went through a *phase* of being terrible at walking up that staircase. It was boxy, with thin steps, and I would be in an overactive rush to get upstairs and slam my bedroom door. I'd taste carpet, here and there. The dream positioned me outside, in the middle of the bitumen road. I was calm, at first, casting my view out on a clementine sunset turning blossoms of the sky a piglet pink. Very aesthetically pleasing dream. Brief, though. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something writing around in the short-bladed grass of a neighbour's lawn. A python contorted its mouth around the body of a tabby cat. It was almost humorous—this overwhelming shape taking up space in the jaw of a snake, one that felt so largely out of place in this part of Australia. Snakes, of course, are such a common norm of the country, but this was not a humble brown snake come slithering from the bushes, where it could hide. This was not a python that could hide in the suburbs.

When I woke up, more concerned than anything, Denis' head was on the other pillow in the bed. He still wore the white shirt, the underwear. We had climbed into bed, said goodnight to each other, and he'd passed out in what felt like ninety seconds. I stared at the ceiling, contemplating my feelings. Part of me felt like a trashy imitation of trope—here I was inviting a man into bed with me, what was I thinking? Another part of me felt foolish for not attempting anything with him first.

Denis woke when I was idling by the closet, trying to decide on what to wear. He lifted his head, smiling. There wasn't much hair on his head to give him bedhead, but he nevertheless had that look to him—someone who slept well, I suppose. Denis said good morning, asked me how I slept. I gave him the sort of lie you tell any old soul that asks: *I slept well. I feel slightly rejuvenated.* I started picturing how Kat would respond if by some chance she confronted this tableau. Her former partner waking up in the bed of the complete stranger that had welcomed them into his home. She would assume, I'm certain, that something indulgently sexual happened, and that Denis had been coaxed into

it. I couldn't be thrown out of my own home, but the sensation of it would course through me. The throes of an establishing shot like this. All I'd wanted was for him to sleep properly.

Denis sat up, leaning against the headboard of the bed. 'The first thing I wanted to do when I woke up was lean over and kiss you,' he said, before rubbing his eyes. 'But then I realised you weren't Kat.'

Once upon a time I had been attempting to grow tomatoes, but I was only half successful. Orbs sprouted off thin green vines, but never burgeoned to full shape. I started to think I'd bought the wrong seed packet, which seemed at the time very much something I would have done without noticing. The remnants of tomato vines dwindle in the patch, mostly overlooked, except for that morning. Kat poked around near them, somewhat intrigued by my failure. She lifted her head, squinting over at me. 'I always think I'll be a better gardener than I am,' she said, using a spade to create uneven divots in the earth. 'For ten years I took care of only myself and a house plant. And Denis, I guess.'

You weren't Kat. Denis had sharply backpedalled on that. He explained he wasn't attempting to resolve the bitter feelings between the two—he didn't want her back in his bed, he didn't want to caress her left arm as he moved in to snuggle close, he didn't want her. I was still shivering. The *other person* still felt like a faraway trope I could never apply to myself, but Denis had soured a moment by mentioning Kat. In the shower I'd tried to wash off the scent of sleeping in the same bed as him. He had shifted, inching towards me without clambering out of the bed. 'If I'd just kissed you without thinking, you might've slapped me across the face and ditched me at the train station.'

I gave in, briefly, to the what-ifs.

Kat was leaving for the city in an hour or so. She'd shower and change after briefly giddyng her inner plant child, and I wasn't sure where Denis had disappeared too. When I returned to my bedroom after taking a shower, the sheets were half-thrown, a low effort attempt to make the bed. He wasn't lingering in the living room, reading the book he'd borrowed the afternoon before. An hour later he came wandering in trying to pull threads of spider web off his clothing, a wide-eyed, stunned expression on his face. He was completely in on the joke; how overblown he was. How minor a comment it had been. How we could overlook anything. Everything. He barrelled down the hallway for the shower, shouting out, 'I feel so, so sticky!' Denis left the pile of his clothes on the floor.

'I wanted to do some exploring,' he explained, now freshly-dressed. 'I wandered around town for a while, putting myself into those shoes of yours.' He pointed down at my bare feet. Out of instinct I followed his finger down, and it was like for the briefest moment my feet were something to gawk at. It was like waiting for an audience of belly laughs, and I remembered how little anyone has seen that

benign, normal part of my body. Feet. Having company in the house again seemed to have been knocking me around, a breeze siphoned through the ears, and I realised I'd stopped giving a shit about something Denis had said half-consciously that morning as soon as he walked back into the house. Him drawing threads of air with two pinched fingers, shaking out his hair, a Best in Show poodle. 'Sometimes you can't see the damn web until you've walked right into it, and you're thinking, okay so there's a spider somewhere on my body, probably? Maybe I left a spider in your shower, Jacob. Sorry.'

Kat was off in the city. Denis was curled up in the living room, reading. I shoved a handful of their clothes into the washing machine and wrote on a thin yellow sticky note that I needed to buy more laundry detergent from the general store. It felt quaint that way, calling it a general store. This life of mine, it was out of the way. I was no obstruction.

Tranquillity, for a while.

I collapsed back down on the bed and started browsing for books, reading through the wish list I had saved, reminding myself of what I would read sometime in the future. When I spent the money. Denis should have poked his head into the room, asked me if I wanted to do something with him to pass the time. Anything, really. I don't know why I expected to receive any sort of response from Kat, on her adventuring in the city. Something like, *can you believe it? I got the job*, which felt entirely too rushed. Too kinetic. Even, *the train is stopped for a while in this tunnel. Track issues? I'm going to be late*. But I was getting too in my head about these things. Expecting too much. If Denis and Kat had avoided talking to each other for so long, they could avoid me, too. We had exchanged phone numbers in case of emergencies. That was all. Was I expecting either of them to add me on Instagram? I no longer kept the account very updated. There weren't interesting echoes of my life that needed posting, unless you counted the two strangers in the house. I paused, then. Saw a future version of myself posting a conspicuous image of the both of them from behind, something I would have snapped when they weren't paying me any attention, but not paying each other attention either. Two wanderers. Then, you hollow out yourself for a caption. Something to brighten up the place. Don't you want to explain your circumstances? They didn't. Not in broad strokes, not in daylight.

Caption it: *we're not the only ones lurking in the woods*.

Tree emoji.

Kat would lean over my shoulder the moment I hit post, appearing out of nowhere. Say something disparaging about the use of emojis nowadays, how there's a certain sort of etiquette about them. There would be a four-string of them in the bio on her profile. Her sister would be directing her on how to rebrand everything. Delete the handsome photographs of Denis. His arms draped around her shoulders. Captions like *I love you forever baby*. I love you until seven weeks of silent treatment, baby.

I wanted to rebrand myself with new book purchases and months-long sabbaticals...somewhere. Before they had arrived, it would have been here. I was so certain Denis was not complicating things.

The refrigerator probably needed restocking, but there was enough for now. A slice of cheese. Torn—accidental—cuts of ham from the store’s compact deli counter. A slather of mayonnaise from an oversized tub. Toasted on both sides. Denis must have smelled something. A hand reached out from behind me, two fingers on the bench as if it were walking. ‘I think we can share, yes?’ He said, smirking. I was clutching a knife in my left hand, about to slice into the sandwich anyway. It was becoming more difficult to deny him. This was mere food. A sandwich I could make a few times over, at least, before I ran out of ingredients. We locked eyes. I ran through a series of different responses: no, it’s mine; I’ll just make you another; okay, fine, because you asked nicely; anything for you, babe. Denis was only asking you for half of a sandwich. I turned away from him, slicing cleanly on the diagonal. Was I making him drool over it? Was there a dragged-out tension, or was barely a moment passing between the question being asked and answered? We were salivating.

Sitting outside, shaded underneath the small porch roof, Denis and I shared a sandwich. He very rarely mentioned his ex-partner, as we drifted from topic to topic. I asked him if he remembers a movie I had watched so frequently when I was little, on a VCR tape my grandmother had. One of many in a chocolate-brown wicker basket in the living room. It told the story of Thumbelina, in an awful animation style children were so easy to overlook. Bright colours spilled across the screen. Sometimes I’d remember a scene or two, let them replay in my head. I would start to think the entire film was brain-created, a dream moulded into a memory, because no amount of searching online for it ever truly connected the dots. Denis hadn’t seen it—he wasn’t familiar much with Thumbelina, either. He just laughed, as I stumbled through an explanation of this inches-high girl and her wild adventures in a world so astronomically larger than she was. Maybe, like so much else, it was a fault of memory. Of perception. Denis bit into the crust of his half of the sandwich.

‘Can I ask you something?’ I said, setting down my half of the sandwich.

Denis glanced over at me with curious eyes. ‘Of course you can.’

‘What first attracted you to Kat?’ I think my question caught him entirely off-guard. There had been a few alternates: the obvious (where had you lived?); the insincere (why did you choose to stay here with me?); and the desperate (did you actually want to kiss me?). The weight of her name seemed to distract him, although he caught himself in the middle of it, and smiled.

‘We got along, that’s all it was at first.’ He paused. ‘Of course I knew she was beautiful, and the attraction physically was there. I was younger, hornier, and I could picture myself in bed with her,

you know, in the dirtier sense. But...I could picture myself not tiring of the time we'd spend together. Obviously that's a moot point now, but we spent a lot of time together, the two of us. People have disagreements, people realise they cannot score a place in a perfect world, unless they completely construct it inside of their head and ruin their relationships in the process.' Denis leaned forward, as if willing to tell a secret. 'We just stopped desiring to put the effort in. We tired of each other.'

Denis ate the rest of his triangle of sandwich quietly, but there was no pretence of discomfort or regret for what he'd said. It was a rather peaceful day. I thought about what it would have been like to live in a cramped apartment with either of them for ten years.

I thought about one night in particular, really. I thought about myself caught in a fierce argument with them, Denis first, then Kat. One of us always louder, more overblown and overdrawn than the other. There was picturing, and conclusions being made, and I had to colour in between what I knew of the two of them, and what I didn't. What I might never know, for they were on the whole complete strangers to me. Two people I hadn't known existed until the day before. That is how you must see new acquaintances. Truly. Their existence becomes fruit on the vine once you meet them, once they're standing on the train station platform, hiding their glances underneath an arched hand. Denis and Kat. Would I ever become louder than either of them, or the both of them? I saw myself idling in an apartment kitchen, hovering by the stovetop. A pot of water boiling, a torn packet of fettucine sitting on the cabinet top. Maybe we begin arguing about something so insignificant—*you're waiting too long, put the pasta in*—maybe we dart in, dart out, skirting around some wholly larger issue, like one of us hiding something from the other. I could keep a secret from him, from her. We could keep beautiful secrets from one another. I could experience that. Losing a person for pretending to be the ordinary me they had first met, no, that part was not uncommon to me. Losing a person like Denis, like Kat, maybe that would be the sort of experience to compel me to flee the country I had lived in for time, and time over. Would I give them a parting kiss goodbye? Maybe I would adopt muteness, too.

Denis and I were in the bedroom, in separate worlds. He was reading a book, one I have never read. I don't know that world, but I could make broad assumptions about it. If only I could remember the blurb beyond the general key words. A story told from the perspective of a man. Our world. As opposed, I supposed, to a fantasy realm where the author could make up the allegories of everything they experienced in this world. Disguise your damp, soggy split, the end of a relationship—it was the fall of a kingdom, then, at the bruised knuckles of a waring king and queen.

Denis and Kat weren't anyone's king and queen. I hardly knew them.

I was letting my mind meander too often.

There was something strangely comforting about lying in bed with Denis, without expecting anything from him. I'd stopped thinking about how easily he'd toyed with me, how sharply he'd

confessed in bullet points, in broad strokes, about his relationship with Kat. I could have fallen asleep, or I wanted to, but the curtains were drawn wide open and I'd never fall asleep surrounded by that light. Denis was light, I'd thought, catching myself in the way I would've been back in high school. I remember having feelings for someone that was never going to love me. Cameron was light. One Wednesday afternoon I watched him halfway down the path outside the Art Building. He was flirting obliviously with a girl, but in my head I saw them kissing. So publicly. I saw Denis kiss me that morning, then shake himself, like a wet dog. It was the sort of reveal at the end of an episode of *Scooby Doo*...jinkies, I thought, listening for his voice, it's you. My landlord. Oh how foolish.

In bed, Denis stuffed a bookmark in his place and turned to me. I must have had an extreme expression on my face, for he looked a little puzzled. I wanted to stab my own eyes out for having any feelings at all for him, but it wasn't as if I wanted to love him, or be with him, or stay with him. Maybe all I wanted was to kiss him. Denis started to talk, again.

'What do you do with the time in your life that you consider you've wasted?'

I didn't think he meant his relationship with Kat. I thought he meant tiny, inconsequential moments, like staring for hours out at nothing. Like scrolling on your phone trying to cling to a resemblance of joy you found at first in a video about an American tourist visiting a copybara onsen in Japan. 'I forget about them,' I said, truthfully, thinking on things. What I remember the most is my embarrassment. And then the true joy—moving here, reading excellent literature, graduating with the degree, proceeding to not overwork myself with it. *Not* meeting him. What I remember the least is how long it has sometimes taken me to shower or roll out of bed. The day a month before when I barely dressed, barely wandered around the house, and masturbated probably a little too passionately. I would not confess that to him, unless I found being laughed at sexy. 'I don't think every moment in a life is going to achieve something, at least not on a grand scale.'

Denis agreed. 'Say you've worked for a company for five years, and you realise you had only been getting paid. True, getting paid isn't nothing, but it isn't getting promoted, it isn't making lifelong friendships with coworkers, it isn't someday being the one who makes every important decision.'

I still didn't think he meant his relationship with Kat.

'Do you regret being in love?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'This isn't about Kat.'

'What about experience, then? What about something to put on the resume?'

'I'm not talking about my actual work, either.'

'What, do you regret telling yourself you're straight?' I wanted to poke my tongue out, but I hoped the tone spoke it enough. Waiting for his response, I started to worry he thought I was purely judging him.

'I'm not straight, Jacob,' Denis said, closing his eyes for a moment.

'I don't know what you're talking about then.'

'Sometimes I consider life the wasted moments, and the flashes that flicker right past my eyes my actual life. I loved what I did for ten years, although I never talk about it. I used to love Kat so much I would wake in the middle of the night thinking the horrendous things I did to her in my dreams were the reality. I'd waited for the day she stopped forgiving me, and then for seven weeks that was our truth, and I couldn't forgive her anymore either. I am home, I'm in Australia again, fuck, and all I want to do is snatch away the life you've somehow made for yourself and forgive myself afterwards for it.'

How could I ever have said to him, *you can stay with me?*

I stared at Denis as if he had both confessed to wanting to murder me and said he was doing fine all at once. I thought of Kat somewhere in the city, maybe waiting in line at a *Starbucks* for a coffee and a biscuit. I wondered if anyone stopped to stare at her, as if the allure of having spent so long outside of the country was a physical alteration to her form. Or a scent. Like she smelled of a faraway place. I blinked at Denis. 'Where did you go?' I said. 'Where did you live?'

'Would you believe me if I told you we were trying to colonise Mars?'

'Was Elon Musk there?'

'Has he been MIA too?'

There was silence between us for a moment. I wanted to ask Denis what he meant about snatching my life. I had a strange urge to ask him what compelled him to work in a post office, or rarely have the genuine sorts of conversations that we'd been having since he opened up to me the night before. I wanted to slap a palm across his mouth, too, and tell him to stop talking all this nonsense, nonsense I completely believed, and just hold me in his arms properly like I could only dream about. I realised looking at Denis made me understand my sexuality some more.

'Did they serve you astronaut food on the rocket ship?'

Denis just laughed. 'I told you, we were starving. They didn't give us anything.'

'I can't imagine Kat living comfortably so long on the surface of another planet.'

'She was having good sex for most of the decade,' he said, grinning.

'Fuck off, Denis.'

'Hey.' He said, moving his arm. 'Come here.'

I inched forward awkwardly on the bed. Our faces were closer. I could smell him; I loved smelling him. I hated that I loved his scent. It felt so animal, it made me feel like I was desperate and too horny and too obsessed with him. Denis leaned in and kissed me. I kissed him back, and I never thought of Kat once, the entire time his tongue was inside my mouth. It grosses me out, thinking of her now.

He had a hand firmly on my ass. We stopped kissing, and he whispered to me, ‘Fuck off, Jacob.’ We both laughed, but I wondered if he actually meant that, in a roundabout way. I think the most he hoped for was a rebound, a light-hearted fling that ended with him leaping off a cliff and closing a book and every other clichéd marker. There was Kat, then there was blank. Which would have been nothing, a flash in his life if anything. Maybe I was there giving him a depressing impression that I would ask for his phone number or let him snatch my life away but stick around to haunt the place like a clingy ghost that couldn’t get the message. I was losing interest in wanting sex with him.

Denis pulled me on top of him and snaked a hand underneath my shirt. I pictured Kat standing on the train platform in the city, carrying overloaded shopping bags. I don’t know where she found the money. I guess I assumed they’d been lying to me about being effectively broke. Denis only wanted to place a palm where he understood my heart to be, and he uttered, without breaking eye contact from me, ‘Pledge to come live on the moon with me.’ I knew he was joking. Could I imagine a serious thing from him, a serious comment of something like this? I would spend every moment of the journey imagining how poor of a substitute I was, how ungodly my body would look rotting on the surface of the moon, in a crater perfectly hollowed out by time. Men would be on the moon. My last thoughts would be of how easily, how simply, I could have said *I don’t accept strangers into my home, Olivia, and when was the last time you invited me out for brunch? How even are you?*

Denis’ hand lingered on my skin. I wondered if he could feel the thump of my heart, if he could somehow translate it. If only he could hear the noise.

‘You need to wake up, Denis.’ I imagined him in a dream cocoon and I was attempting to stir him back to a world where he was still in outer space with Kat. Oh how we love to bully ourselves for fun.

He laughed, slowly retreating his hand. ‘Pledge you’ll worship me, then.’ I assumed he was still joking. I wanted to laugh the loudest I had ever laughed before. Maybe if I laughed hard enough, chaotically enough, I would tip backwards and crack my head on a sharpened edge, the frame of the bed, and he could snatch up my life with all the ease of the world. *Pledge I worship him.* Almost like saying I love you, to some people. It felt impossible to love him. Or it felt simple.

I jailbroke my mind and saw myself kneeling in front of him. There was something wrong, of course there was. I almost contemplated drawing on a pair of breasts. I realised I didn’t need to think about Kat so much when I looked at him. I almost reached for my phone to send her a text message. *I hope you’re finding a new place to live.* I wanted to be alone so desperately.

‘I’m just joking around,’ he said.

I leant down and kissed him. ‘I know.’

‘We should kiss in front of her, when she returns from the city.’

‘I don’t think she’d care,’ I said.

‘About two years ago, I stripped naked in front of her one afternoon, completely out of the blue. I stood there, not expecting anything. I said to her, this is how I would look if someone wanted to draw me. I told her I had a vivid fantasy of being asked to pose for an art class, and I would be quietly admired in pencilled form. In the shades and the shadows. I pretended to pose for her. She smiled at me, told me I was a silly lunatic, that I could have told the story clothed. Clothed.’ Denis paused, pulling me into another kiss. ‘I want you to ignore the stupid things I can do.’

He didn’t really want me to pledge anything. ‘Stop kissing me,’ he whispered, laughing at himself. I thought I was having a stroke.

Denis wasn’t aggressive. He didn’t physically move me. But I eased off his stomach and collapsed down beside him, staring up at the ceiling. I thought I heard a distant creaking sound, like the door opening and closing, and I didn’t even mind that. It could have been a burglar come to shoot bullets all over my body and maybe some part of me was ready and willing for that. It’s strange how you can be both content and on the verge of a mental breakdown all at once. Being alone in a place like nowhere could be like that. Sometimes the thing I wanted most was someone to disturb me so I could be both thankful and disrespected. A range of emotions, instead of the small handful that typically just felt comfortable. I liked being happy, but I was familiar too much with being uncertain. Denis made me feel uncertain.

That night, after dinner, Kat brought out something she’d bought in the city. It wasn’t much. She had caught her sister on a lunch break from work, and somehow the two things mingled. Purchase and sister. Something bought and something returned. Kat held the thing in her hand like it meant a whole lot more than she spoke of it. Which is to say she treated it like she had paid the electricity bill. Kat had bought a four pack of donuts. Glazed, perfectly round Krispy Kreme donuts. Denis made actual eye contact with her, smiled at her, but I think he was truthfully replacing her head with that of one of the donuts. He licked his lips.

Taking a bite of one of those donuts was better than I imagined orgasming because of Denis was like. Maybe that was a cruel thing to suggest, maybe I was half-tempted to ask Kat what it had been like. Being in love with him and orgasming from him. That was assuming he had made her orgasm in the however-long they had been together, or the however-long they had been in love. I realised, then, that I had no idea how long the relationship was. Time and time spent, all to end in seven weeks of silent treatment. If Denis had stripped naked in front of her then, or now, how would Kat react? Flick him the bird, maybe. Or simply turn and walk away.

The three of us squished together on the loveseat, a couch meant for two. Two to fall in love, I imagined that was how they used to advertise these. Lean into each other and embarrass everyone else, foolhardily make-out with one another. Eventually, shut up around each other. Denis was licking his fingers now. 'Thank you, Kat,' he said, and I wondered whether it was a thank you greater than simply for donuts. I doubted it. People like Denis, like Kat, they weren't sentimental the way I was.

Kat smiled at him, at me.

I almost said, *get a room, you two*. Bad humour. Fucked-up humour.

Instead, I squeezed out from between them and said, 'I think we should play a game.'

Denis eyed me as if he expected me to retreat to another room and bring out *Scrabble*.

'I stay here, count to one hundred, and the both of you find a good therapist.'

They both laughed at me, but I wore the steely expression of someone completely serious.

Then, a smile crept onto my face. A laugh escaped out of my lips. The three of us I am sure could all use some sort of therapy, but instead we found comfort in that moment. Of them thinking I had an honest request, of me thinking their stay in the guest bedroom wasn't the last time Denis and Kat would talk to each other. In my dreams I considered the pair of them sitting at an inner-city café in seven more weeks, unpacking their moody grievances. Kat would say, *I hate your silly pledges, I thought you deserved some medicine, a taste of your own*. He would laugh, make an expression that showed he knew she was right. Denis would say, *I loved you until I didn't, but I hope you find it in you to forgive me, eventually*. She would nod, and no one around them, in the quaint café, would be staring, or poking the obvious holes in their farce. Kat would say, *forgive me too, would you?* Neither of them would mention me. Jacob would be irrelevant to them. I'd be a few days in a pile of notes.

I heard the water run in the bathroom. Denis was showering, and he wandered out afterwards in just the towel. That felt like it was out of a movie, but only because no one ever showered in the house, let alone walked around afterwards. He held the towel with his left hand, lingering in the bedroom doorway. 'Do you want me to leave?'

'No, I'm just starting a movie.' I wanted to ask if he would join. I didn't.

'I meant the house.'

I was probably pathetic, the speed with which I immediately shook my head.

'You aren't an intrusion, Denis, not really.' *So what if I felt uncertain about how you wanted to kiss me but started rejecting it too*. He walked further into the room, leaning over to see what I was watching.

'I haven't seen it,' he said. I'd pressed play five seconds earlier on *Evil Dead Rise*. Sometimes the internet could be spotty, and watching a movie could mean a lot of buffering halfway into the thing. I was familiar with it, used to it. Denis was looking at me. 'Give me a second to change and we watch it together?' I wanted to kiss him, which was stupid. Stupid, dumb, and made me eager to tie a noose

round my neck. I waited there patiently in bed, a film stuck on pause. We were about to crowd in front of an iPad and watch a horror movie together, and I still couldn't understand him. Denis was the worst puzzle because he *was* a puzzle and I thought moving out here into my isolation meant I was abandoning the half-finished puzzles I'd been finding the pieces for. All it took was one piece to go missing, to get eaten by the dog, to grow legs and wander off underneath something, or find a comfortable spot in another room. Denis was too charming.

Denis wouldn't give me a decade.

Maybe I only needed a couple of days.

Kat wanted to go stay with her sister, so she left on the train the next morning. It was definite the only reason she returned was to collect her things, and maybe there was the slightest chance she wanted to say goodbye to him. She could've thanked me via text message. The donuts felt genuine, because Kat was still genuine. I just didn't know her much at all. I never would. Fifteen or so minutes after we watched her board the train, she sent me a message. For some reason I still thought it was sent to the wrong person, despite how she addressed me by name, and thanked me for offering a roof for her tired head. And her tired limbs. Her tired heart. She hadn't mentioned the latter, not in those words, but subtext is subtext, really. Kat said she expected to be bored out of her mind, and stuck sharing a bed with a partner that stopped being hers. *I'm grateful you kept him distracted.*

On the trail back towards the house, Denis stopped me, holding onto my waist with both of his hands. Now would be the time for him to tell me everything was over, I thought. *Pledge to me you will never talk about this again or try to message me asking if I was worth a damn to you.* He could be like every other man. Surely. I was nervous about kissing him. He could be like other men and abuse me for it, and if I fell in the woods and screamed my lungs dry, no one would hear me. Life, it is for the snatching.

Denis looked at me with curious eyes. 'Pledge to me something.'

I waited for something absurd. Something uncomfortable, startling.

I didn't expect: 'Pledge to me you'll be a little overeager and text me often.'

He hadn't said he was going yet. I nodded my head like a fool, because agreeing to any of his stupid pledges felt like I was making a mistake. I expected him to sling me over his shoulder, carry me back to the house, and instead of throwing me into bed, he'd find the closest thing to the Bible and make me swear on it. A dictionary? A dictionary.

'Come and visit sometimes,' I said, without thinking.

'I like kissing those lips.'

'I'm not some whore.'

‘I also like your company, Jacob.’ He paused, taking in the green that draped around the two of us. ‘You helped, too,’ he said, returning his focus back to me. ‘I think I would have just kept hating myself and hating Kat. Now I don’t hate her.’

But I still hate myself. I could relate to that, as much as I loved myself too.

‘You should make another sandwich,’ he said. ‘For us to share, you know.’

When Denis left, it felt strangely overdue. He’d been in contact with his brother for a while, and they had found somewhere closer to the city to live together. A unit fifteen minutes from a train station. He said he would buy a car anyway, but he didn’t mind the train. Denis knew riding the train could lead him someplace he found comfort in—or I think I assumed he knew that. His brain still confused me. Some nights we would cuddle up to one another, but I could have just been confusing the human need to search out for warmth. Confusing it for something else. Sometimes we kissed. Sometimes he slept in the guest bedroom, and he’d give me the sort of look that suggested we needed to keep our distance from one another. He was smart, he’d gone to university, by the sounds he’d found a stable sort of career living on damn Mars of all places. Smart enough to know spending a lot of his paycheck on public transport, or fuel, any of that, it would have been the worst thing he could do. Not cry, no, if he wanted to cry he would have cried. I cried. I was walking down the path towards home and I sobbed. I thought high school was the last time I would really, truly, cry over the dumbest of things. Remember Cameron, remember how I had cried over Cameron for thinking you could have the things you wanted, and still let the natural way of things course its path through life.

I remember texting Olivia and saying, *I think I might turn that guest bedroom into something else. Do I need a proper library?* Sometimes I would check in with her. I have never wanted to visit her, though. I think that’s cruel of me, but I’m a loner. It’s the natural way of things. She sent a couple of the laughing emojis, the ones that feature what reminds me of wads of spit coming out the sides. Crazy laughter. I did, I do, all my crazy laughter by myself, sitting in front of the television.

I sent Denis a message one day, or one night, I suppose. It was 9:32pm.

‘Why’d we never have sex, then? Does your dick not work?’

He replied twenty minutes later.

‘I want to marry a boy that’s saving himself until the wedding night.’ He knew I wasn’t a virgin, though. I wanted to punch him in the shoulder, then kiss him. ‘I’m just kidding.’ I just assumed he would never give me a serious answer. Maybe he would give me the silent treatment for seven weeks.

Three dots.

‘The last thing I wanted was to think I’d scored you as some prize for not being intimate with Kat for almost an entire year.’ I waited for that to be everything. ‘You know, I think she’s happy now.’