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An Imaginary Man

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AN IMAGINARY MAN

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2022

Dedication

For Sofia.

AN IMAGINARY MAN

by

BENJAMIN BOUVET-BOISCLAIR, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Preface

If I had to summarize *An Imaginary Man*, I would describe an empty piñata hanging over the stairs of a two-story apartment building. It might not make for a great pitch, to forget the American expat living upstairs, the end of his long-distance relationship, and the rest of the plot. But for the last year, that image haunted me as only an image can haunt a writer, because I knew the writing of my manuscript depended on my understanding, and my portrayal, of that hollow star of papier-mâché and frills.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino writes: “In devising a story, therefore, the first thing that comes to my mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms” (88). In a sense, Calvino trusts imagery before he trusts words. It sounds counterintuitive considering our medium as writers: at the beginning language remains elusive, though trapped, inside that first image. I’ve always feared starting with the big ideas—the themes, the conflicts, and so on—perhaps because they seem without origin. For me, it’s reassuring to know that the significance of a story, and the language to say it, already exists in the real world. And this is also why the purest form of my novella lies in the image of that piñata, in its eerie sway over the steps.

Robert Bresson’s characters and plot, and ultimately his subject matter, came after focusing on the very materials a camera can capture: “sights, sounds, movements, silences, spaces and rhythms” (Gariff 4). Something similar happens to me as a spectator of his films—I don’t walk away talking about what happened, but rather about what was shown, and the

possible meanings lodged deep within those images. In *L'Argent*, the closeup shot of the red gloves worn by Yvonn as he untwists an oil hose continues to burn in my mind today, because something about those gloves, thick and stained and red, express something I cannot put into words. Beyond the symbolism of fate, and the foreshadowing of the blood he spills, there remains an electricity, a charge in the image that escapes explanation. Only a meditation on the sensorial experience, I believe, can bring an author this close to the creation of images that sear with meaning.

For a long time, I stubbornly believed—after turning it over and over in my mind—that the meaning of the piñata would reveal itself. Now, my instincts have hardened into a logic, an anatomy of this image that I hope is palpable across the novella. It consists of three essential parts: the state of suspension; the friction of tangibility and intangibility; and, finally, the containment of emptiness. Along with minor, yet relevant digressions into a few other concerns, the diffusion of these three essential parts frame the remainder of this preface.

Suspension

Limbo may be another word to express this element, the sense of unfinishedness in the suspension of a piñata, never filled, and never broken. Paul Valéry notes: “Il faut être léger comme l’oiseau, et non comme la plume” (485). The rendering of a heavy object light can bring an ethereal quality to that object, making it seem almost airy and thus, suspended. Valéry insinuates the converse: one must be heavy like the feather, and not like the bird. To make that which is light heavy can also vest a similarly eerie quality in that object. In the original scene from which my novella developed, the narrator looks out the window:

The sky had a mechanical hum, the noise of city traffic carrying through the countryside, up to the coastal towns, where it then probably vanished in the slap of waves. Along the sidewalk, lampposts glowed weakly in the dark like the helmets of miners marching down an endless tunnel. Some clods of soil remained on the ledge from where a few days ago a gust of wind pushed the geraniums. Two floors down the clay pot tilted over the grass, somehow unbroken, as if it had yet to land. (85)

Here, I wanted the unfinishedness of the objects to create an ambiance of limbo. The noise in the sky is machinelike, weighty, and has yet to disappear. The glow of lampposts becomes heavy in the comparison to helmets, the wind strengthened, and finally, a flowerpot is lightened, made to seem midfall. I strove to make everything persist in a vacuum, one without laws of gravity. Such a composition of setting can also reflect the interior of the narrator: his inability to process the end of his relationship filters through his vision of a seemingly infinite world, suggesting his refusal to accept the breakup.

The narrator routinely applies Valéry's instructions to his observations, reinforcing an internal conflict between the imaginary and the real. Instead of confronting the concreteness of reality, he tries to make things unreal, airy, and inconsequential. I wanted my character to avoid his shame and pain by mitigating the things around him. Although he may not be fully conscious of the dreamlike world he fabricates in order to shrug off responsibilities, I hope the reader will see through it, and through him.

If a reader knows something a character doesn't, this can incite moments of tension. So, whenever my narrator refuses to face his feelings, and attempts to diminish the things, people, or both, that channel those feelings, there may be an extra layer of tension. For example, at his jealousy over Ela's sexual partner the narrator remarks: "Anyway, for me, he was less than solid. Even less than liquid. He was like the chartreuse floating like a green gas

in the bottle. He hissed into her apartment. How could she touch a man barely heavier than air?” (69). In a sense, the narrator does the opposite of what I try to do with imagery: he tries to vaporize the origin of his feelings. However, I hope that his negation makes apparent his true feelings lurking within this image of suspension, this lightening of a body into a green gas. There, I also wanted to double-down on the elements inherent to the piñata. Aside from suspension, the narrator makes the tangible (the man) intangible (a gas). I figured if I could express the central image in more than one way in another image, the more unified the piñata would feel across the novella. My intention was to gain an effect of repetition without having to repeat a word, so to concentrate the reader’s attention on this object, or rather, therein, the ideas.

Digression

When Calvino continues, “Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations” (88), he emphasizes the importance of the multiplicity of a single image. Kazuo Ishiguro, the author of *A Pale View of Hills*, roots the central image of this novel in the suicide of the narrator’s daughter. Images of rope, lassos, and objects that dangle, such as swing sets, recall her hanging. Even in minor domestic disputes, a tension runs beneath the text, setting the reader on edge. In the following scene, the husband’s father has yet to appear for breakfast, and his absence, matched with the husband’s missing tie, leads to this exchange:

My husband gave a shrug. “It’s nothing to make a fuss about,” he said. Then he looked up at me and said: “I wanted my black silk tie today, but you seem to have done something with it. I wish you wouldn’t meddle with my ties.”

“The black silk one? It’s hanging on the rail with your other ties.”

“It wasn’t there just now. I wish you’d stop meddling with them all the time.”

(132)

Given the significance of rope, the context forces the reader to think of the worst: the husband’s father took the tie to hang himself. Taken alone, the dialogue may seem mundane, but in the imagistic field created by Ishiguro this scene touches the nerve of the narrator’s story: her daughter’s suicide. Finally, the tie, merely misplaced, engages with the reader’s imagination, and permits a discursive storytelling.

Ishiguro’s intentions behind these digressions, and the narrator’s avoidance of the painful subject matter (“The Art of Fiction No. 196”), served as a revelation during the writing of my novella: people rarely talk about their suffering in straightforward ways. Sometimes they tell other stories instead of the one that most matters. I sought to also create an unreliable narrator—one who hides his true feelings, and rambles, all the while pinching the nerve of his story. To do so, I tried to make pairs of images, in the hopes that even the most disparate images trigger tensions, or other scenes in the novella. This way, even if my narrator goes off the beaten path, I hope, it feels as if he’s still on track.

For example, Ancient Egypt comes up twice in my novella. The first time is wedged between the narrator’s thoughts about both Ela and Consuelo, the other woman he might be in love with. The second time, some thirty pages later, the narrator imagines speaking directly to Ela. He tries to tell her how he finally left her, but ricochets into tangents, on page 99: “Even though at the Louvre I stared at the sphinx statues, at that jagged flatness where their noses tumbled off centuries ago, and thought of you.” An isolated reference to Ancient Egypt

could feel like an unnecessary foray. But here it can spark the tension pertinent to its first reference, thus warranting this digression.

Moreover, through the repetition of imagery, I tried to take advantage of the affect “the increasing connectedness of things” (Gardner, 192) can have on readers. Pairs of images can work like satellite dishes, sending radio waves in space, making a ping for the reader. I strove to transmit those pings, or connectedness, through images, to unify the text, despite the narrator’s unwillingness to tell the story straight.

Tangibility and Intangibility

Apart from hanging by a string, something else about the piñata that struck me as significant was what can, and cannot be, touched. The papier-mâché and frills are concrete, but the nothingness inside is ungraspable. One of the forms taken by this friction is the cigarette, appearing fifty times throughout the novella, often between the fingers of the narrator. In *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose says that if a character smokes a cigarette, it should mean something, because gestures “are like windows opening to let us see a person’s soul” (213). I wanted the narrator’s cigarettes to represent his desires, and also his obstacles. Its constant gesture, I thought, could chain together a series of glimpses into this conflict.

For example, following his grandfather’s death from lung cancer, the narrator buys his first pack, citing curiosity as the reason: “Curiosity because my grandfather was my first dead guy. Nothing the doctors said could explain his death, and the only way I could even begin to understand it was by taking up the cause” (30). Here, my intentions behind this glimpse into his reasons is to show his need to physically process his grief, to be able to hold onto

something in face of the void of death. But even the cigarette disappears during its usage, its physicality like a brief illusion.

As I learned about my character, and his tendency to diminish the concrete world, I also wanted the objects of his desire to be inherently doomed to fade. It seemed like a way to deepen his inner turmoil, to thwart his desires in the same way he tries to thwart reality, by denying its concreteness. So, the letter he sends to Ela, a thing wrought from his own hands, gets lost in the mail. Ela herself seems like an illusion of physicality, as the narrator broods over his feelings for her, on page 35: “Even if I could’ve smashed her to pieces, I realized, no chunk of her would contain the source of my agony.” For me, an inner conflict is one that also feels like a set of nesting dolls, because often, within a conflict there hides another, waiting to be hatched. During my writing process, I tried to continue opening my narrator, to locate the small, solid source of this conflict.

The tangibility versus intangibility played out more and more in the narrator’s response to his surroundings: “Whenever I went out, I had to duck under it, like all the other space I avoided.” (6) This is followed by a list of places wherein the narrator has desired Ela, absent from Bayonne, Biscarrosse, Paris, etcetera. In many early drafts of *An Imaginary Man*, I hesitated to make visible these places. In an attempt to underline suspension, or weightlessness, I hid the names of places behind letters: Biscarrosse was A, Paris was G, and so forth. I was convinced my narrator was purely someone who longed to erase the world, so to erase his pains, and shame. But he was also someone who maps the world—otherwise, he wouldn’t have even bothered to use those letters. At the bottom of this character, I sensed a

need to be tangible, a fear of himself disappearing. The only way to make sure he exists anywhere, finally, is to name those places.

Moreover, it became clear that the names of villages, cities, countries, and historical sites, could operate as shells in which the narrator moved, thus imitating the outer layer of the central image. To contrast the absence of Ela, it became necessary to establish the whereabouts of her absence, so to heighten the friction between the tangible and the intangible. This realization led to a breakthrough, and the geography surrounding the narrator began to have a new purpose in the narrative: to influence the narrator, and thus the story. So much related to France—the French language, the terrorist attacks of 2015, the Atlantic ocean—began to function like a character in this novella, one who imposes its presence, and who the narrator cannot escape.

Place

The relationship between setting and narrator is nearly inextricable. As Garry Disher says in *Writing Fiction*, characters and setting must interact, and must be changed by one another (134). Biscarrosse, the village where the narrator lives, has the particular history of a site of the first airmail service in the world, information which spurs the narrator to write the letter. But its military base may better highlight the friction of tangibility and intangibility.

The possibility of violence straddles these two concepts when, while watching children in the schoolyard from his window, he hears the rattle of machine guns in the distance: “For a moment, the kids seemed to intercept those faraway bullets. For a brief, absurd moment, the village lost space and time” (50). This confusion leads to a macabre reinterpretation of the

events unfolding in his mind, and yet, none of it is real. The gunshots come from miles off, and the children are safe, joyous. This possibility of violence versus the actual peacefulness of his surroundings pits my narrator between the imaginary and reality. I thought this theme could be more acutely felt in the fear of bodily harm, because of how palpable the mere suggestion of physical pain can be. It's not necessary to have a scene of violence, I thought, if the narrator creates the same tension through his fears.

Mark Polizzoti, translator of *Suspended Sentences*, echoes this sentiment when he says its narrators, “maintain a slight remove, as if full engagement with one’s surroundings carried the threat of great pain, or mortal danger” (vii). This tense engagement can create an ambiance that not only overwhelms the character, but also the reader, as if at any moment, something devastating may happen.

In light of the November 2015 Paris Attacks, the possibility of violence has a specific and unignorable role in this city. My narrator visits two weeks before this atrocity, and sits in Comptoir Voltaire, one of the cafés struck by terrorists. This fact, I hope, creates a disturbing atmosphere between the tangible and intangible, between the actual moment and the terrifying future. There, my narrator tries to vicariously love Ela through Giovanna, a brokenhearted Italian woman, the absurdity of which he admits, on page 23:

In little more than a week, a man would walk into the Comptoir Voltaire wearing an explosive vest, windows exploding. And though we sat now, unscathed in our tiny wicker chairs, unaware of what would soon happen, avoiding the splintering wood, the shriek of broken glass, we could only misunderstand each other.

In this case, the violence later concretizes itself, and is part of a pattern of the many grazes with danger experienced by the narrator. The menace of spatially faraway gunshots or

a temporally faraway bomb grates against the actual places and times of the story. Even in static scenes, wherein the narrator is standing in his room, or sitting at a café table, I wanted a tension to grind against the edges of the narrative frame, to keep my readers at the edge of their seats, just in case. In a way, if danger is the elephant in the room, my intention was to keep the elephant outside the room, chafing against the walls, thumping around on the other side of the door. The possibility that the elephant barges into the room, I hope, maintains tension.

Containment of Emptiness

The third and final element of the piñata is not unique to this novella. One of the ways I learned of the containment of emptiness was through Haruki Murakami's short story, "U.F.O. in Kushiro", when the protagonist, Komura, must transport a weightless box to Hokkaido in the middle of the winter. His wife has just left him, and in a letter states that living with him is like living with a "chunk of air". This chunk of air, this weightless box, ping during the progression of the narrative in other manifestations as an empty noodle shop, as a salmon made of nothing but skin, or a room in a love hotel for the now single Komura. These are all contained spaces of emptiness, amplified by other descriptions, especially in that of Hokkaido:

No snow had been allowed to accumulate on the streets in Kushiro, but dirty, icy mounds stood at random intervals on both sides of the road. Dense clouds hung low and, although it was not yet sunset, everything was dark and desolate. The wind tore through the city in sharp squeals. There were no people out walking. Even the traffic lights looked frozen. (13)

The city—dark, cold, snowless, abandoned—contains an emptiness. This compels the reader to compare the setting to the interior world of Komura, and although the result is mysterious, it's a powerful way to suggest, rather than tell, the reader what may be happening within the character. In fact, Murakami abstains from referring to Komura's emotions, as if the character himself were also an empty vessel. The reader is limited to perceptions of things outside of Komura, another example being the Kobe earthquake, its reoccurring imagery enveloping this character, layer after layer, until it is hard to disentangle him from that destruction. In a sense, the arrangement of the images around this seemingly hollow character allows the reader to fill him with their own conclusions.

My narrator also encounters many empty spaces, and yet, I hope that an image can be one that ultimately changes, and surprises in its power, hence why I tried to adapt this containment of emptiness. The narrator, for example, often notes his own interruption to these spaces. On page 68, in a chambre de bonne in Paris, while sleeping on the couch, he remarks:

The ceiling was alarmingly close, so when I got up, I had to be careful not to bang my head. This was probably how the pharaohs felt in their tombs, I thought. Then again, they were dead. But those tombs were big, weren't they? Just in case they were alive, or some part of them was alive, so they could move around, and enjoy their lives in the underworld.

This—the first reference to Ancient Egypt—is an image of a space sealed off from the rest of the world, and one of eternal vacancy: death. And yet, similar to the saying about Chekhov's gun—if it hangs on the wall, it must be shot—I believe an empty space holds the potential to be filled. The way readers bring substance to Komura, I hope my readers also

make their own conclusions about these empty spaces, and ultimately about my narrator. Elsewhere, I try to tap this potential through other interruptions of empty spaces: beetles fly in through an open window, bits of soil are stored in pockets, and finally, the narrator, without trash bags, and needing to go to the recycling depot, he stuffs the piñata with wine bottles.

Character

In past creative work, I often wrote about characters to whom bad things happen, as opposed to characters who do bad things. This novella has allowed me to take a risk as a writer, and to plunge into the psyche of a man with problematic ways of interacting with language, sexuality, women, and place. Over the past year, he has transformed from a lovey-dovey American expat to a manipulative loner who must come to terms with his false expectations about the world. Showing this way of thinking has been a constant challenge.

Young writers are often groomed to show, and to resist telling, the interior world of a character. Perhaps for this reason I have relied so heavily on the sights, sounds, movements, silences, spaces, and rhythms of this novella. However, I fear this has led to an imbalance in the scales of show and tell, and in future drafts, I wish to work at establishing an equilibrium between the two. During the process, to cope with this challenge, I drew a parallel between the comic book character, Tintin, and the narrator.

In bearing the nickname of Tintin, the narrator creates a correlation with the Belgian reporter. While reading *Cigars of the Pharaoh*, I was struck by certain aspects about the comic book character in relation to the narrator: his incessant movement from place to place; his ability to escape scot-free the most dire situations; and in particular, his constant entourage of

other men. To further make this point, Hergé's near exclusion of women from his comics should be examined more closely.

The reader—the intended audience of these books—was unsurprisingly masculine. Hergé's belief that women are linked to the boring, quotidian world, led him to create fantastic worlds to which Tintin, and by association, the reader, escaped (Mountfort 636). My own narrator, constantly seeking the imaginary, the unreal, and inconsequential, embodies this twisted logic. Despite his search for intimacy, he constantly sidelines the women in his life, and finds himself surrounded by a cast of other lonely men. This parallel between the comic book character and my narrator allows him to use Tintin as a sort of mouthpiece, so to speak directly:

But Tintin was invincible, and never suffered more than a red scratch, or some dizzy stars over his head, forever escaping the bad guys, just what I wanted: to feel nothing, to escape forever.

I was disappointed that after going through so much trouble to get a Schengen visa, the life I'd left behind still belonged to me. I missed Ela for a month, but after more than two months, the word, Schengen, seemed like the name of a made-up place Tintin went to, where a million things happened, and nothing since Tintin wasn't real. (10)

This is far more explicit than I usually am with my narrators. His free expression of wanting to feel nothing, to escape, were only possible for me to write through these visual tropes common to Tintin. It was as if my narrator were wearing a costume, and could suddenly speak in a way I otherwise wouldn't permit. The alter-ego of Tintin, thus, allows my narrator to talk openly about his desires and disappointments.

Another way to expose the narrator's conflicts was through the cast of men. Only a few months ago, I had ten other significant male characters: childhood friends, a math teacher,

Consuelo's brother, an acquaintance in Paris, etcetera, all of whom since boiled down to two: Franz and Alphonse. This decision came from the feeling that the novella felt like a party wherein the narrator was trying to introduce everyone to the reader. In other words, I feared the reader wouldn't have patience for so many characters, and would just end up forgetting their names. Moreover, I finally understood that the relationship these men have to the narrator was what most mattered: what they represent, as ideas, compared to him.

Margarita García Robayo, in *Waiting for a Hurricane*, created characters who each represent a different means of escape from the narrator's hometown. In the first few pages, the narrator states: "When people asked me, what do you want to be when you grow up? I'd reply: a foreigner" (11). It follows that the first essential character the narrator meets is, in fact, well-travelled. Other characters also represent means of escape: a boyfriend in Miami, a brother in Las Angeles, the captain of a plane. This delicate condensation of character into a firm idea drove me to try to construct my characters in a similar fashion.

Franz, for instance, has a nihilistic perspective on place. He contradicts my narrator, because he believes that place is pointless. Although he informs my narrator about the first airmail service, he underlines the accidents, the sinking of the seaplanes, the impossibility of overcoming distance. I hope this slanted perspective brings nuance to my narrator's beliefs about place. On the other hand, I tried to illustrate the physical involvement with spaces taken by Alphonse. If the narrator is constantly uncomfortable with his environment, the young Frenchman is capable of filling those spaces, whether with himself, or with other objects.

When the narrator tries to make an excuse to leave his friend's apartment, Alphonse invites him to play chess: "I didn't know how to say no to Alphonse, who was already dragging

his desk to the middle of the room. He tossed a bag of peanut M&Ms on the table, and prepared a mocha pot” (52). A desk, a bag of candy, a coffee: Alphonse generates instead of, as the narrator is prone to doing, subtracting. He has a confidence with the world that is missing in the narrator, a way of seizing it, concretely, that the narrator fails to do. Ultimately, I included these characters to reflect, like mirrors, his naivety and disorientation insofar as place.

Piñata

Suspension, tangibility versus intangibility, and the containment of emptiness: though I have dissected the central image, and tried to scatter its elements throughout my novella, I’ve just begun Calvino’s step wherein the writing, “guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along” (89). At this moment, I sense that the piñata and its surrounding images have only just settled onto the page. I also sense that, when I sit down again in front of this manuscript, I will likely cut many pages.

The other day, I came across a severely compressed version of *Waiting for a Hurricane*, and marveled at García Robayo’s paring down of her novella into a short story of barely more than a couple thousand words. Then again, whether the novella came before the short story, or vice versa, I don’t know, but in the latter the characters and scenes jut like rocks from the sea. When all is said and done, I want only the essential parts of my story to emerge over the page, and for the rest to lay below. Of course, in order for this to happen, I need to know what is and isn’t essential for the reader to know. What can be summarized, so to move onto the rocks of the story.

Over the last year, a single image has led me through the writing of a novella. As I continue to revise and edit this manuscript, I will keep in mind that piñata midair over the stairs, its eeriness, and how upstairs, there's a man who wants to sometimes be imaginary, or makes things imaginary, but who feels undeniably real.

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An Imaginary Man

1.

A couple of weeks after moving to Biscarrosse, I saw the Atlantic Ocean for the first time in my life, and finally understood why people once thought the world was flat. I stood in the water, jeans rolled up to my knees, squinting like an idiot, looking for a lighthouse or a sign of New York, but seeing only a boat scudding along the skyline, until it too fell out of view. It would've been easier to forget Ela that way. To think of the horizon as a ledge her keyboard piano, and brick apartment, were pushed off.

To turn away, stumble across the beach, find my brown suede shoes, and never know her again.

I'd run there from an old Peugeot parked on the boardwalk, the girls pushing down their dresses and readjusting their bras, and four Italian tomato-pickers strutting up the road. A little while ago, downtown, they'd stopped for our thumbs. Their newsboy caps, and rusty Peugeot, gave them the look of men stuck in the twentieth century. They told us in broken French that we could all fit, especially the ladies. The doors swung open.

I stood on the curb while three German teachers, a fellow English teacher, and two Spanish teachers clambered in, including the Argentinean woman, Consuelo, who took a last swig of wine, then set the bottle on the sidewalk. The car bulged with bodies, writhing with hands, all waving me in. As badly as I wanted to see the ocean, I preferred not to squish in. But just as I bid them a goodnight, Consuelo, teetering on a pair of knees at shotgun, said there was space for me.

Right there, on her lap.

My face crammed against the windshield, I had a close-up view of the cigarette burning between the fingers of the driver, whose hands smelled of dirt, and the yellow line slithering under the tires like the spine of a flattened snake. Consuelo spoke in Spanish, the driver in Italian, and they understood each other well enough for her to figure out the summer had ended, and come morning the Italian tomato-pickers would leave the Bordeaux region. I laughed the whole ten-minute drive. I didn't want to die, but the possibility of broken glass in my hair, with Consuelo's hands wrapped around my stomach, on my way to the Atlantic, struck me as a perfect end. Who could've ever predicted me dying in the arms of an Argentinean woman? It was the furthest I'd ever gotten from my life. So far, even if I wanted to go back, I couldn't.

Outside the car, I knocked the sand out of my shoes.

Consuelo stood beside me, her straight, dark hair cut to her shoulders, her forehead glazed by the lamplight. She stared ahead, then turned away, as if she'd seen the ocean a thousand times.

Do you know the constellations? she said. She had her back to me, head tilted up to the sky, an unlit Gauloise between her fingers.

No, I said.

You should. I know my own stars by heart, but this is your hemisphere, she said, lowering her gaze. At night, her blue eyes had the bright chalkiness of pool cues.

I've never been starwatching, I said, though the truth was, I'd never had the patience. I wasn't an astronaut, everything in space unattainable. We walked towards the Océana nightclub to catch up with the others.

You should learn them, Consuelo said. Constellations are maps. I'm a little lost here, but in my hemisphere, you can drop me into a jungle, and I'll find my way home.

Maybe you can invent a new constellation to get back to your apartment, I said. I stopped and looked up to find a scatter of stars that might resemble something obvious, like the Big Dipper. But they seemed just as randomly spread about as all the decisions I'd taken to arrive at that boardwalk, on a warm night in October. If I were to connect the dots up to the moment when I'd applied to teach English as a foreign language, I'd have one of those drawings done by angry, unartistic kids.

That's the loneliest thing I've ever heard, Consuelo said.

Why?

Because nobody else can follow it. Constellations are communal. They have stories and names referred to by whole societies. To invent a constellation solely to navigate my way to my apartment would be purely egotistical, Consuelo said, waving her burning cigarette dangerously close to my face.

But you could invent a story and a name, I said.

In the essay for my application, I'd written about my Quebecois heritage, and my experience as a camp counselor in the Adirondacks. I'd spun them together until my essay shined like an open suitcase of gold bars. And, sure, it was true, I'd had a lot of dead Quebecois people in my past, and I'd rubbed sunblock on bony chests of children for ten bucks an hour,

but it wasn't the truth about why I wanted to come to France. If I'd told the truth—that I simply wanted to escape—the Ministry of Education would've sent me to a psychologist than give me a visa to come across all this land and water, all this land and water that seemed weightless, as if despite all the men and maps before me, and all the compasses and ink, I was in uncharted territory.

Good luck convincing the rest of the world of that, Consuelo replied.

Océana was empty, except for the Italian tomato-pickers at the bar. They watched us from under their hat brims as we took to the dance floor. Perhaps they saw us for what we were: a bunch of lucky foreigners paid to teach twelve hours a week in Biscarrosse. Perhaps they saw the friction between us all, so careful to avoid grazing each other under that flashing disco ball.

Consuelo danced with her eyes closed. I couldn't help hoping that when she opened them, they'd be hazel. But everyone's eyes were the same color in that dark nightclub.

2.

I lived in a two-story building with four apartments, all of them empty except for mine. Downstairs, a foreign language teaching office and, leaning against the stairs, the bikes from the police station. The population of Biscarrosse swelled to eighty thousand over the summer, and reports of stolen bikes went through the roof. Police cracked down, tourists left, and one day at the end of October I stood outside a garage behind the police station.

The white concrete pavement sparkled, and the sunshine cut along the edge of the open garage door, the inside in shadows, the divide between light and dark so exaggerated that I felt almost holy, standing before a herd of evil goats stuck at the bottom of a cave.

I got a red Schwinn mountain bike with jammed gears. Above it, and above the stairs, there hung an empty piñata my roommate made. Whenever I went out, I had to duck under it, like all the other space I avoided.

Ela. Those first few months, I saw her name on a fruit produce truck in Bayonne, and her last name on the labels of wine bottles I never bought in Biscarrosse. I studied the beauty mark over her lip over my tablet screen, trying to remember its exact shape, and how it moved when she spoke. Whenever I slept badly, I thought of her arm wrapped around my lower back, strolling down sidewalks lined with dogwood trees and lampposts on a spring evening in SoHo. I imagined making love to her everywhere: in cars, buses, trains, at a conference in a chair while drinking coffee in Dax; on a couch in Paris; in a cemetery, against a headstone; in a dressing room in Bordeaux; and plenty of places she'd never been to before. I could've filled a map of France with thumbtacks of everywhere I dreamed of us having sex, yet all my crude

cartography would've proven was that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. No fantasy added up to even one of her skin cells. The nude she sent me was made of millions of stiff, cold pixels, and nothing else. I never held it—I didn't have a printer, the noisy one in the teacher's lounge too risky. Of course, I could tap my keyboard, I could find her, gleaming, petrified, arched above me, but I couldn't touch her. Along with our hundreds of emails, the photo remained in my inbox, suspended like patches of mist in Biscarrosse. I tried to drag my hand through that mist, my palm always dry.

The day my roommate made the piñata, I walked in on him, and there he was, sweaty-faced, crouched on the kitchen floor, his hands caked in papier-mâché. My roommate was Chilean, but he'd spent some time in Mexico. He was the other Spanish teacher, squeezed into the backseat of that Peugeot from the other night. His name was Franz.

The piñata was for his classes, though he never filled it with candy or let the kids take a swing. That was more than I ever did as a teacher. I dreaded those mornings, standing in front of twenty elementary school kids. I had nothing to teach, even with all the English in my head. Usually I just photocopied some coloring book pages, then walked around the room, peering over shoulders, congratulating the kids who stayed inside the lines.

I watched Franz put the frills on that white star, like watching someone put the feathers back on a chicken. What I learned about Franz that day was that he wanted to become the apprentice of Alejandro Jodorowsky, a Chilean movie director, and more importantly, a tarot card reader who owned Le Téméraire Café in Paris, and that he wanted to read my future.

I didn't let him get very far. He went to get his pack of tarot cards, long cards with backs like Persian carpets, and he asked me my birthdate. When I told him, he said that I had a lot of iron in my blood. Then, after lighting an incense candle, pouring us each a glass of Languedoc wine and shuffling the pack, he revealed the first card, a prince sitting on a hill, holding a clear bottle, with a dead snake inside.

Franz told the story of the card—the prince putting a dead snake inside the bottle, then sitting atop of a hill over the kingdom, ashamed and afraid of what he'd done, trying to find a good place to bury the snake in the bottle. Franz talked about how I had a snake I wanted to bury too, something probably related to my family, and as the sun receded in the kitchen, I let him turn cards and babble, but I didn't listen to a word he said after that first card.

Sure, I may have wanted to bury upstate New York, and Quebec, but that had nothing to do with a dead snake inside my bottle.

Once we were good and drunk I started to listen again, and then he talked about love. He wasn't reading my cards anymore by then—maybe the reason why I'd started to listen again. Uncorking a second bottle of Languedoc, he had this desperate look on his face. Love was entirely dependent on one thing, he said. Every two or three seconds he stopped spinning the corkscrew to finish his sentences or brush a single long hair out of his face. The penis was a key, he said, the vagina a keyhole, and some vaginas were simply not made for some penises.

We worked twelve hours a week, leaving us one-thousand-four-hundred-sixteen hours to kill, seven days a week. The night after I bought a military digital clock, staring at the red numbers, I feared what would happen once they reached midnight, the numbers going on and on: twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, and so on, until the end of time. Writing Ela a long

email, typing like I had eleven minutes left before the first nuclear explosion, the French army had tested a rocket from the nearby military base. Perhaps the end of the world, for me, was to keep count of the infinity, the nothingness of all I'd accomplished.

The last time I'd seen Ela still fresh in my mind, in May, on my way to my grandfather's funeral in the boonies of Quebec. Awkward timing, but I'd already bought a train ticket to visit Brooklyn for her birthday, so I made the stop. The street and cars in Brooklyn stitched over with yellow pollen, for three days I sneezed and rubbed my eyes. The last day, I looked deadpan into the whites of a pharmacist as he said there was no such thing as instant relief allergy medicine. That night, Ela shifted her body mirror towards her bed, the first time. During lovemaking, I stared at my bloodshot eyes, until I couldn't keep going. For the rest of the night, I felt like a headless horseman, lying on her bed, my face covered with a warm, wet cloth. In the morning, she accompanied me to Port Authority.

Writing that email, I looked out at my window, half-expecting her to call my name, but I imagined her face, the same one from Port Authority, hundreds of feet under New York City, the escalator steps sliding under her tennis shoes, while I got on my bus. Her face like someone watching someone leave, I still could've jumped out my bedroom window—a ten-foot drop, nothing but a hard knock to the knees. But when I turned around, all I saw was the fat corner of Le Petit Prince Elementary School, looming over the concrete ledge, like a whale washed up behind my apartment.

I went back to writing, trying to fill with words those one-thousand-four-hundred-sixteen hours.

Still, Franz—who got a bike with working gears—turned to yell at me to hurry up, we were just going in circles, Biscarrosse one traffic circle after another, the time I pedaled straight through one, Franz calling me an American who ignored the traffic rules.

And the traffic circles only got worse: once the rainy season started, he and I twirled around each other like dirty coins in a spiral wishing well, twirling to hide our faces from each other. Surprisingly, we never collided.

Franz's tarot-card spiritualism didn't exactly go out the window, but just hovered in the apartment, in front of the television, where he stayed up until two in the morning, watching the Chilean soccer league. One night, after a bad day of classes, he looked up and said, You know, it doesn't matter where you are: Chile or France, we all shit, piss, and sleep. That's the truth, Tintin.

That's what Franz called me. Once he saw my red cowlick and trench coat, he gave me the nickname. I loved the idea of being Tintin, an adventurer with a little white dog, and sometimes I even thought about being a reporter, even though, of course, all I ever wrote were long emails to Ela. I set up my tablet in my bedroom, on my ironing rack. Salty wind banged my windowpanes open like saloon doors. I lit a Philip Morris and started to type, as if I were in a comic book. Then again, what did the Belgian reporter ever really write? I never remembered him at a typewriter. But Tintin was invincible, and never suffered more than a red scratch, or some dizzy stars over his head, forever escaping the bad guys, just what I wanted: to feel nothing, to escape forever.

I was disappointed that after going through so much trouble to get a Schengen visa, the life I'd left behind still belonged to me. I missed Ela for a month, but after more than two

months, the word, Schengen, seemed like the name of a made-up place Tintin went to, where a million things happened, and nothing since Tintin wasn't real.

I didn't have a little white dog. All I had was Franz.

He got me thinking about writing Ela a letter. The rainy season had started, one of those nights after the rain had finally stopped for two minutes, and Franz and I went out the door to get some fresh air.

We went down sidewalks crumbled with chestnuts shells, until we arrived at the seaplane museum. With its glass walls and seaplanes inside, I'd always thought it a fancy hangar. Franz complained about Biscarrosse being a village of water, cigarettes, and boredom, when rain—as if the sky had heard him— again riddled the road. We took shelter in the doorway, and then he told me that the first airmail company in the world had started in Biscarrosse.

Water, cigarettes, boredom, and flight, I said.

And Antoine Saint-Éxupery, Franz said. The writer of *Le petit prince*—which my mother used to read me—had been an airmail pilot, and flew from that very lake that both of us were watching, at that very moment, as a storm broke out. The lake seemed somehow bigger, its waves faster, like an army of tanks deflecting all the bullets of the world, rolling towards us in the dark. Franz went on about the seaplanes skimming the waters, trembling into the sky with hundreds of pounds of mail. Accidents happened along the way, pilots got lost, and sacks of letters sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Later that night, on paper from the elementary school, I started to write that letter, the only way to give Ela a part of me. Something tangible she could touch. But accidents happened

to me, too—my pen dried up and the light-blue coloring pencil one of my students gave me seemed almost transparent. Finally, Franz lent me a black sharpie. The toxic smell made me nauseous, and all of my words thickened, as if what I wrote threatened me. The next day, I stole some paper from the printer, and a ballpoint I found in the teacher’s lounge. I wrote twelve pages, until my arm hurt. I wrote in print and in cursive, and I wrote watching the news: local protestors angry about the importation of foreign wines had cracked barrels, flooding the streets with red wine. That was how I wrote—with barrels of ink to break. Everything written with one goal in mind, for Ela to grip both sides of the paper, somehow feel her fingers touching my skin. I went to the post office.

3.

My application to teach English as a foreign language came to me in the form of voices. Not voodoo or gods, but the voices of Frenchwomen.

On one of my visits to Brooklyn, Ela had wanted gnocchi, but also wanted to take a nap, so I'd gone out to the grocery store. Meandering up the aisles, I heard them. I rarely spoke French in those days, not even with my mother, and the moment I heard those voices, on the other side of the pasta aisle, in the early afternoon on a weekday, they caught me off guard. I hadn't heard my mother tongue since a phone call a month ago, when my mother had asked me what I was doing with my life, and how I couldn't just keep working in a bar, and since then I'd been walking around like a city rat on its hindlegs, reaching for something, my nose in the air, but not sure for what.

I held a bag of sweet potato gnocchi in my hand, and leaned my head against the cold metal shelf, and listened. I couldn't say what they were saying—it might as well have been the moans of whales—but the sound of my mother tongue made me stop, surprised, later on, that I'd kept breathing, that my heart had kept beating, and that my brain had continued to give orders to my hand to hold onto the orange, floury pulps. All that mattered to me was the sound of two Frenchwomen talking just as my mother talked.

I craved the unbrokenness of their speech—its wholeness. I didn't want to be a baby again, to live in a womb—but to live in the very sound of the language, to hear, once again, the sound of my own mother.

I no longer knew what I'd come for in the grocery store. My hand clung to the bag of gnocchi, as I followed the voices down the bread aisle, then the breakfast aisle, and finally, to the frozen foods, where the voices talked about pizza. The voices belonged to young Frenchwomen, but if they'd stolen my gnocchi, I couldn't have even given a description to a police officer, if asked. I kept my ears pricked up and grabbed bags of seafood, mussels and shrimp, until my entire hand was numb.

I followed them in line, then paid and went after them out the door.

I hoped only a few feet ahead of me they'd turn around and ask for directions, or for a good coffee shop. Only as they crossed the street did I remember Ela, and I felt this wild desperation to escape somehow my very self. The only way to do it, I thought, was for these Frenchwomen to turn around. But they kept walking, and I stayed at the street corner, two bags of shrimp weighing down my fists, enough shrimp for Ela to look at me, and take out one bag after another from the grocery sacks, until she found the sweet potato gnocchi, cold and wet, at the bottom. I knew what I had to do: follow those voices to France, fall in love with a Frenchwoman.

4.

On a rainy Friday night in Bordeaux, happy to have simply escaped that village, Franz and I cheerfully checked into a prisonlike hostel, and went back out whistling, our chins against the drizzle. People ran by jaggedly as if drawn by a mechanical pencil on a bumpy bus ride.

We went on, passing under the archway of the Place de la Victoire that brooded like an existential question at the edge of the rue Saint-Catherine, until we drifted to a bar with green shutters. We grabbed a table by the window, hung our coats to dry over the chairs and watched people play pool for a while. We complained about our students, and the school, and six or seven pool games later, I went out looking for an ATM.

The rain had let up, and I wandered in a boozy stupor all the way back to the Place de la Victoire. Before turning around, I stopped before the Place de la Victoire archway, feeling pleased with myself for having come this far alone, a breeze flitting my trench coat around my legs. Along a short wall some young men in soccer tracksuits sat. Bordeaux had come alive, the passerby now sketched in sharp, controlled strokes of ink, just like those sentences I'd written to Ela, and which now, at that very moment, flew at the high speeds of a modern jet. The wet cobblestones seemed to heave lightly at my feet, like the scales of a massive, ancient fish, almost alive under my shoes. The sky cleared, a full moon washed out from the bottom of the clouds.

To commemorate a moment on the true shores of Schengen, worthy of Tintin, I lit a Philip Morris.

From a group of girls nearby, a blonde stepped out towards me.

Can I steal one? she said.

Of course, I said. She asked me where I was from, and why I was in Bordeaux, and then abruptly apologized, and fled through the arches, my penultimate cigarette between her fingers, her hair shining in the damp darkness. If I had a little white dog, I'd have turned to it and said something corny about love. Then a young man—blue tracksuit, with a big star on the chest—popped up.

What about me? he said, nodding at my pack, lifting his thick eyebrows.

Of course, I said, but when I looked into my pack, I had only a single cigarette. I burst into laughter when I said I couldn't possibly give him my last cigarette. I even showed him the silver paper inside the pack, and dumped out the little bits of tobacco. I apologized.

Perhaps we can share, like friends, said Monsieur Big Star—I never got his name. He didn't smile when he spoke.

Sure, like friends, I said. I handed him my last cigarette. Monsieur Big Star had a thin mustache. Lighting up, his mustache squeezed around his upper lip like a string. I asked, You from here?

Sometimes, he said. He had big, moody eyes, and when he leveled them on me, the force of his gaze almost knocked me a step backwards.

What do you mean, sometimes?

Sometimes I'm from here, sometimes I'm from somewhere else, he said. He took another drag and let the smoke out without a rush, slow and steady like a gun barrel in noir movies.

Can I have that back? I said. Monsieur Big Star gazed at me, then took another drag, and let the smoke out, again, in the same way.

No, he said. Was he kidding, or just joking around? I gave him a friendly chuckle.

Please, I want to smoke, too, I said. But Monsieur Big Star shook his head, took another drag, and blew smoke into my face.

Ashy mint chewing gum smoke.

With one hand I grabbed the big star by the chest, like rugburn to my fingers. I closed my other hand into a fist and drew it back, as if I were drawing an arrow in a bow. I'd never thrown a punch in my life. Monsieur Big Star grabbed me by my trench coat collar, and raising his fist.

We turned like a carousel, Monsieur Big Star dipping up and down around me. I should've told him how I used to suck on rolled-up pieces of paper as a kid, and blow out imaginary clouds. How I used to watch my grandfather's blue smoke curl up and disappear before it touched the ceiling. Nicotine reached the brain within ten seconds, the same time it took for a man to fall in love.

Wasn't that a coincidence? I would've asked, and then playfully nabbed the rest of my cigarette dangling off his lip with cinematic sexiness. Cigarettes are the best metaphor for love, I would've said, shamelessly, psychotically, before bounding into the other facts: every fifteen cigarettes caused a mutation in the human genome, and so every pack made us a little bit more of a monster, just like every lover also made us a little more monstrous, don't you agree?

And I could've told him that cigarettes contained over five-hundred ingredients, including—apart from those obviously poisonous chemicals—honey, chocolate, and tomato

sauce. How Ela made a lovely tomato sauce, but of course, I couldn't pretend hers was burning down, centimeter by centimeter, into Monsieur Big Star's mouth.

Wasn't smoking a bit like a public display of affection?

But all I just shouted was for him to let me go.

Later, after he'd let go, I passed the ATM hidden at corner just outside the bar, I told the whole story to Franz. Inside, rubbing his temples, he explained that instead of *laissez-moi*, I should've shouted *dégagez-vous*. He'd studied at the Alliance Française all his life. I was in the middle of Bordeaux, shouting in terrible French. Passerby stopped and looked at Monsieur Big Star and me spinning there, marveling at my horrendous French as I tried to avoid a fight.

We each had a fistful of the other, and I didn't let go—I couldn't, because if I did, he'd wallop me—so we kept spinning, until he spat out my last butt, and released me. My butt had a fizzling red tip on the cobblestone, like the wick of dynamite between us. It felt so simple, this sudden freedom, that a part of me longed to turn again, to feel his fist curled under my chin, to watch the butt fall from his mouth, only to be released, again.

I flailed down the street, whipping my head around, just in case Monsieur Big Star gave chase. But he just stood there, under the archway, laughing.

Even if I'd had the last cigarettes in France, they wouldn't've run after me. No little white dog by my side, just the long Rue Saint-Catherine ahead of me.

5.

At the end of our Toussaint vacation, along with tickets to a Chilean cumbia band, Franz booked us three nights at a hostel in the Bastille. The hostel, thrust between some bars, so long and narrow, I feared the next morning we'd walk out to a ship deck, in the middle of the ocean. My first day in Paris, I followed Franz's ponytail through crowded street markets in search of weed or Le Téméraire Café—I wasn't sure which, until we bumped into one of his old expat buddies, who brought us to a small apartment full of other Chileans, and weed. From the brief moments of French, I learned that the Chileans were all Alejandro Jodorowsky disciples.

The cumbia band played in a circus tent. On stage were guitar, trumpet and saxophone players, and a singer—a old, stooped man with sunglasses. All the French people below went mad, dancing in the mosh pit, while the Chilean expats, Franz, and I stood at the top of the bleachers. None of us twitched a muscle, our sneakers sticking out over the metal row by an inch, our gazes bloodshot. It felt less like a concert, than a beheading. In the morning, Franz still snored on the top bunk, and I went downstairs, ready to strike out alone.

I had a stubby baguette, orange jam, and vending machine coffee on a tray, and faced the breakfast tables, rowdy with the mix of languages, when I saw a woman sitting by herself. Even from where I stood her dark, curly hair dangling over a book, her barely touched breakfast made me think of Ela.

After asking her if I could sit down, learning her name, Giovanna, and that she was Italian, I soon figured that if Ela's grandmother had never left the old country, and if Ela also

wore tortoiseshell glasses, she could've been there, sitting across from me, as she tried to keep up in French, until, like Giovanna, she switched to broken English.

Giovanna had come to Paris to visit a painter who'd abandoned her on his doorstep, then gotten into a car with another woman and zoomed off. She almost cried telling me all this, but she cheered up when I asked about her book on Italian architecture. She flipped through some of the pages, the buildings flattened and dissected to a series of lines. A student in Verona, where the painter had lived over the summer, she'd modeled for him but I didn't ask for details. Impossible to shake her from her heartbreak, we sat there, drinking, what she said tasted like burnt espresso.

To a fellow Italian with a gap between his front teeth, she introduced me as a French speaker, about which I was proud, until I heard him nonchalantly babbling in perfect French about a horse ride he'd gone on through the Bois de Vincennes. I shut up until he eventually wandered off.

Giovanna proposed that she and I see the sights together, and to meet out front in five minutes. Franz was just getting up as I swished in and out in my trench coat, fearing my one chance to again be with Ela might disappear.

But she was there, her jolly Italian self, rolling a cigarette. Though the sky looked cloudy, something about Paris felt like a painting, *my* painting, where I could change everything with one flick of a brush, the weather, the street, the woman.

A couple of hours later, after moseying through the Luxembourg Gardens, we sat under the awning of a café on Avenue Gambetta.

He don't want start story with me, she said in her broken English, as she rolled her fourteenth cigarette of the day. In the window behind her a man downed an espresso and hurried out. The barman perpetually stuck talking to somebody new behind a bar scattered with cups and saucers, I couldn't bear letting Giovanna smoke alone, so I started to roll my fourteenth, too.

I asked her if she wanted to start a story.

I don't have trust for him, she said. Same man who tell me I have beautiful smile and beautiful eyes don't kiss me and make my eyes cry.

I told her she had an ugly smile and ugly eyes. She laughed, and pretended to leave, pushing up from the table. I laughed, too, but was tired of that painter, the storyless man. I was tired of the allusions—he could roll a cigarette with one hand, and he'd taught Giovanna how to see the beauty in the world, the yellow petals in a puddle, and he lived in the eleventh arrondissement, right where we were. But painters were gentle, I thought, as Giovanna leaned over to light my lumpy cigarette. I almost wanted to ask how he'd painted her, but I bit my tongue, just as she got up to go to the bathroom.

We walked down to the Père Lachaise Cemetery, where Giovanna wanted to visit all the famous graves: Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Frédéric Chopin, Jim Morrison. Under leafless branches I trailed the heels of her Converse sneakers, up crumbled stairs, until we arrived at Chopin's grave. I asked her if she played the piano, hoping, like Ela in bed one morning had tapped a nocturne on my thigh, Giovanna might make silent music out of my leg. But she just shook her head and went on aiming her phone to take photos, clicking away at the kneeling stone woman and heaps of roses. She later sent me those photos—of me at the Luxembourg

Gardens, eating a crêpe, me standing in front of Notre-Dame, in a café, and everywhere else we went, but she sent no photos of herself, no evidence of her existence apart the angle from which she saw me.

Yet we were happy in that cemetery. We went up those thin cobblestone streets, onto Marcel Proust, and Oscar Wilde, and when the sky fell in a drizzle, we ran out. Disappointed as Giovanna was about not finding Jim Morrison, I couldn't help imagining an entire life with her, in Verona: me a retired Belgian reporter, walking my little white dog, and her an architect, with rolled-up plans for the future.

We ran out, and kept running, until we took shelter in the Comptoir Voltaire. Wine barrels flanked the doorway, and red lightbulbs hung over our heads, heat lamp radiating next to us. The server squeezed through the evening crowd. I ordered something cheap and rouge for me, something cheap and blanc for her.

Once the server left, Giovanna squinted at me and said, You have accent. I think you speak perfect. No, you speak like me. Behind her, mopeds scurried up the street like rats. She rummaged through her purse for her tobacco bag.

It's loud in here, I said, distracted by the thought of Franz reading tarot cards, as I chased after a brokenhearted Italian woman.

And you? You have story? Giovanna asked. Perhaps she had misheard me, but either way, I wasn't sure how to answer.

Yes. Or no, not really. It's complicated. She lives in New York, I said. The wine is good, isn't it? Above the rim of her glass, Giovanna raised an eyebrow.

It okay, she said. What she like? The lady in New York.

She's good, I said. I longed for an interruption, the painter barging into the café, me pushing him, grabbing Giovanna's hand, running into the street, back to the hostel. Anything, I thought, for us to get away from this topic. In little more than a week, a man would walk into the Comptoir Voltaire wearing an explosive vest, windows exploding. And though we sat now, unscathed in our tiny wicker chairs, unaware of what would soon happen, avoiding the splintering wood, the shriek of broken glass, we could only misunderstand each other.

Giovanna was talking again about the storyless man, now tapping her veins, saying, He make me hot blood, and now I am hot blood. The nonsense of that sentence I thought, how marvelous love was when talked about brokenly. How honest—because talking fluently about love only led to lies. It wasn't worth speaking French like that horse-riding Italian, or English as I did, or Italian like Giovanna, because the more beautiful the language, the easier it was to hide the truth. All those poets and writers were hypocrites, I thought, as I looked at Giovanna's glass of white wine, pink under the red lightbulbs. She'd gotten up to go to the bathroom during my reverie and now, as I looked over to the doorway, she stood, with her cellphone. In the photo, I smiled like a fool, my trench coat hanging down around me like a drooping flower.

Giovanna and me go to Seine.

It is night and stairs smell like pee-pee and wet newspaper. Lampposts make light on water. Give water muscles, like big snake. I want take glasses of Giovanna off face. I want kiss her. But she ask why don't start story with Ela. I can't, I say, I cannot. She ask why you here? Why no there? How to say this? I feel all cigarettes I smoke and all walking I do in two days

in Paris. I feel my coat very heavy, like old man skin. She wait for me talk. I say I go in one year. No now. One year, I say, and point finger in air. Her face in light beautiful. But only beautiful for two second. Then feeling go out of me. I kick beer bottle and it go in water. She tell me no pollute.

I want drink or cry. I not hungry, but she want sushi. Rice and fish, in Paris, that what she want. Incredible. I leave her outside hostel. She talk to Italian horseman. He smile at me, and hole in his teeth big, very big. I want go in hole. I want hole. To fall and fall and fall. Franz not home. Two seconds, I am sleep. I dream it night. I am in Avenue Gambetta. I walk, it rain, and I go this way, that way, this way, that way, same street, no going nowhere, no advance! I find big black gates at Père Lachaise. They open. I go in. I no afraid. Rain stop but wind shake trees. I feel rain on my head, on neck. I go to wall. I keep hand there, very bumpy like when hair on arm go up, but I no afraid, I go with wall in dark. I make circle. One circle, two circle, three circle, and go close to center. I find Ela there, in future, I know. She wait for me in future. Four circle, five circle, six circle. She wear black shirt, black pants, in future. Her face wet from rain in future. I come to center, to statue of soldier, World War I. On stone, broken lady shoe. It is Ela. I know it is Ela. I find other broken lady shoe in future. I know. I begin again. Now center to wall, one circle, two circle, three circle, but then I wake. I no know how many times I go in circle. Twenty? I horny. Circle make me horny. Franz in bed, smell like old wet sock. It rain real outside, in window. I look at window, touch me, very quiet, very, very quiet, and Franz sleep.

Giovanna not in breakfast.

I say goodbye Franz, go to train station, watch people come, go, come, go. Man play piano. Ela always afraid play if people listen. She say she never play if people there. Nobody listen now. Nobody, just me. I listen.

I take train. Look out window, France very green, many hills, many trees. Train station in Bordeaux, I wait outside for new train. My phone go bzzz, bzzz. I look. No Franz, no number I know. I answer. A happy voice of Frenchman. He say, Hello? I look you everywhere, everywhere. Where you are?

I say, Bordeaux. Who talking? I think maybe is painter. Painter happy, why? I give Giovanna my number yesterday. Maybe painter curious? Jealous?

The man say, We need meet. You, me, how long you in Bordeaux? I be there soon. I go in car now. I come now. Wait for me, he say. He sound happy and angry. Like he make cigarette with one hand and hold phone at same time.

I leave soon, I say. He say what time, where. Biscarrosse, I say. He say why. I say ocean, relaxation, watch birds. Good life. Stop, he say. What about money? He angry now. Money? I say. He say, no move. Stay. No move, I come in Bordeaux. I say I cannot. I go to ocean, relaxation, birds. I say maybe he have wrong person. I no money. I no from here. I sorry.

No fucking move, he scream. My life of mother, no fucking move. I break you fucking legs. You go one foot, I break you legs. You go pay me. I know you no from here you African dirty dog, you dirty, you pay me fucker.

I try talk, but he scream.

I break you door fucking down in Biscarrosse if you go, he scream. I hang up. I look. People come, go, come, go, come, go. I no know if people nice or crazy. I shake. I go to train.

Old man sit in other chair inside train. I shake like wet tree. In Biscarrosse, I lock door five time. I sit in bed. My eyes open. I think, someone can break door? I by myself in my apartment for first time. I wish, Ela, Ela, Ela.

Although I never could own up to it, that was how I must have sounded in French. Perhaps the only way to truly tell the story of Ela and I was like this, without illusions, or disguises, with only the brute force of what had to be said. For so long, I had hidden behind elaborate promises, delicate rhetoric and I sat there in bed, my legs dangling over the edge, I realized what a talented liar I was, how even to myself, for months, I had been weaving together a story that would only allow me to leave, to always leave. And now, I was alone, in this apartment building, afraid of the world behind my door.

6.

Perhaps Franz was wrong. Love wasn't entirely dependent on sex, as he insisted, but on place. On who was there, and who wasn't. Flies patrolled the edge of my dirty plates, and a red-chested bird flew in, landed on my bedroom floor, flew back out like a silly move taken back by a chess player, but Ela never saw any of that. Nor did she walk with me to the recycling depot to drop six Languedoc bottles into the green tanks. She wasn't there, sitting next to Franz and me on that red couch, watching endless soccer games.

The morning after the attacks in Paris, to make sure I was alive, she sent me seven emails. She had no idea how many hundreds of miles separated Biscarrosse from Paris, or that I was sitting safely on the couch, watching that France-Germany soccer match, when over the stadium two crunching blasts drifted like toxic clouds.

Sounds like a bomb, Franz said. I didn't believe him at first, but a few minutes later, the game was suspended, the news came on, and the death toll, a number Ela later saw and feared, rose in the corner of the television. She could only guess at my whereabouts, which I made hard and harder to follow, like obstacles, or fucked-up breadcrumbs, until for all she knew, I could've been strewn amongst the bodies on the floor of the Bataclan.

Not even in Biscarrosse could we fathom what had happened. That morning, after the onslaught of emails from Ela, I stood in the schoolyard and held hands with the teachers and students while the principal tugged out the orange microphone cord, and wearily tried to explain a good-versus-evil battle to the kids. The sky was grey. Behind me, there came the gasp of a sob, or what I thought was a sob, until I turned around to a couple eight-year-olds stifling

laughter. The swift punishment, a smack to the back of their heads from the gym teacher, left them looking at the pavement, tears dropping.

But something about that innocent obliviousness seemed more honest than whatever the principal was rambling about. Nobody any Biscarrosse had any relation to any of the victims. Clueless to their names, their lives, I felt as if the grief had been forced upon us, and however hard we tried, we couldn't grasp what had truly happened, the rattle of Zastava M70 AKM assault rifles, the sticky smell of blood, the screaming. At the end of that minute, we all filed back into the school. I taught my students how to count to ten. Even while watching the news, day after day, listening to the pain of the Parisians, we went on with our lives. A woman, in an interview, said the attackers were *lâches*—cowards, the first time I'd ever heard that word, and that whiplike sound of the word, *lâches*, was probably the most I could feel, bringing me back to the night before I'd flown to France, in September, standing in my bedroom and cracking the Venetian blinds.

The crickets screaming, and the dead grass looking like the blonde girl's hair swept over her shoulder, from a few nights before. It hadn't been her fault the drought had left upstate New York parched and yellow. I kept telling myself that soon I would land in Bordeaux, and my fingerprints would be the only sign left of me in that upstate New York town. My fingerprints on those Venetian blinds, and everything else I'd touched, which hadn't been much. What were fingerprints, anyways, but proof of what we've let go of? And how long do fingerprints last on a dusty slat? I didn't feel like asking Google any questions.

I would have a four-hour layover in New York in the morning, thankfully not nearly enough time to catch a cab in Brooklyn and back for my flight. I'd already made peace with Ela. Just twenty minutes before, we'd peacefully ended our skype call. We'd surrendered to the facts: I was getting on a plane in the morning, and despite my promises to visit one last time, I wouldn't see her. She'd asked me why. Out of excuses, I'd told her I was grieving my grandfather. Ever since he'd died in May, I hadn't been the same. That was what I'd said, and sure, I was a little sad, but his death had nothing to do with my emotionlessness, or why I'd never made the proper arrangements to see Ela. But she believed me. She didn't have much of another option, especially considering her hopes of working with trauma victims.

I remembered, just before pulling my fingers out from the Venetian blinds, contemplating my grandfather's old white Volvo tanning in the driveway, still with the Quebecois license plate clinging to the bumper. Back in June, I'd unpacked the six cardboard boxes of walnuts. My grandfather had been a lumberjack, but he'd never chopped down his walnut trees. At least, that was the romantic was to say it—he did, one year, have to chop one down. We'd been visiting, and I remembered him slicing the bark off with a knife, showing me the tunnels the beetles made, eating their way up the trunk.

I could've spent the whole summer bunkered in my bedroom behind those cardboard boxes, waiting out the drought, surviving on walnuts. But I didn't crack a single one.

I didn't know where the vice had gone. That was how my grandfather used to do it: he wedged the walnut in the vice, and spun the handle. As a kid, I could spend hours cracking walnuts alone. I loved how slowly I could break the shell. How I could control its splintering,

watch the opening of that soft, dark covering. Sometimes I just cracked them without eating, and made piles of walnuts for my grandfather.

But why hadn't I gone to Brooklyn? When I'd left Ela in May, I was sure I'd loved her, but after the funeral, something happened. Something crept up on me, something I could barely wrap my head around. I could feel it those nights I took the landline and walked down the street, talking to Ela, walking all the way to the stop sign, where the connection got fuzzy. Sometimes all I wanted to do was keep going, to walk into the crackling silence.

But about my grandfather: I never had to say much more to convince Ela. The less, the better, because while alive, he was cruel with me. Since I didn't talk much French, he used to say I would never go to college. I remember complaining as a kid about going on visits to Quebec, and my mother saying that my grandfather was a sad man. That's what she said: Your grandfather is a sad man. Later, she told me about him growing up without a father, and then I understood a bit better.

Still, he should've seen me this summer, reading those old Quebecois newspapers in his backseat, an open French dictionary on my knees. But he died of lung cancer—an awful way to go according to my mother. Despite my promise to never touch cigarettes, I bought my first pack in June. More out of curiosity and convenience, probably, than grief.

Curiosity because my grandfather was my first dead guy. Nothing the doctors said could explain his death, and the only way I could even begin to understand it was by taking up the cause: the blue smoke of his that never ever quite reached the ceiling. Convenient because it was good training for my future country of residence.

I was flushing butts down the toilet the whole summer. Even after the day my mother said she'd rather die in a car accident than in a hospital. We were on the highway, just after walking out of the grocery store to this shaggy mutt pissing on the license plate—still Quebecois because my mother hadn't yet registered the car in New York—the *v* in *je me souviens* dripping yellow, me holding my mother back from kicking the dog.

In the car, I had this vision of both our faces shattering the windshield. My mother held the wheel tight, and when she changed lanes, I closed my eyes and looked away. When I opened them, I was staring at the rearview mirror. I spent the rest of the drive wondering how objects could possibly be closer than they appeared.

It was strange, having those boxes of walnuts sagging around my bedroom. It smelled just like my grandfather, like wood and rain, as if he were lying here, just above the boxes. But I couldn't say his death made me sad, even if I did say it, to Ela's face over the screen.

Perhaps things would've been different if I hadn't lived with my mother. How was I supposed to introduce Ela? She wasn't my girlfriend, I wasn't her boyfriend. Plus, halfway through the summer, my mother asked me if I was running around with more than one girl. We had just parked outside the house. I had a foot in the Volvo, a foot in the driveway.

Sure, there was a girl who had sent me a nude of her lying over a lemonade-glass towel, and asked if she could come over. But I had apologized about my broken cellphone camera—it wasn't broken, but I had no idea how to take a nude—and said I was living with my mother. Another gave me her business card after fooling around in an alley behind a bar. Then I walked home just as the sky began to lighten, and the façades of buildings looked like bruised skin. But I didn't sleep with her, or any of those girls, except for the blonde. She came over while

my mother was asleep. She barely existed—the next morning, when my mother asked about the noise, I said I was doing jumping jacks.

I studied a toad flattened in the gravel, and had my second epiphany: there was no better place to tell a lie than halfway out of a vehicle. Something about not being fully in the car, not fully out, made halves of everything, even truth.

Was it possible to be half-sad about my grandfather's death?

Perhaps. After all, one night, I did have a dream about him. We were standing in that very room, surrounded by those boxes. He was rolling a walnut around in his fingers, the way he did before he put it in the vice. It was pouring out, and I could hear it loud and clear, the rain hitting the ground. He went over to the window, bent down one of the Venetian blind slats, said it was raining nails, one of those old Quebecois expressions. I got up and rose the blinds, and looked out. Nails, real nails, were clinking all across the street.

But that final night before I flew to France, I lowered the Venetian blinds one more time. Outside a lawnmower buzzed in the neighborhood, and the hot sky spiraled in a silver sheen like a UFO hovering above the houses. And then Ela called me.

She said she had a surprise for me. She told me to wait a second, and suddenly, over the phone, I heard this thick and scattered flurry, just like how I imagined the static past the stop sign. I didn't have to ask her what it was, or where she was, at her window ledge, at the edge of her fire escape.

It's raining, she says, it's finally raining. Is it raining there?

No, I said, it's not.

I let the Venetian blind go, and felt, suddenly, the need to apologize to her. She asked me what was wrong.

Nothing, I said. After a moment, I told her I had to pack, the last thing I said to her in New York.

After sitting in the Comptoir Voltaire two weeks ago, even I couldn't understand how much I had escaped. My death, or Giovanna's body in my arms, or broken glass in my hair, the ringing in my ears for weeks, the fear of smoke for the rest of my life, the fear of sitting at a table. How impossible it was, to wrap our minds around a certain hour at a certain corner where only, perhaps, a single hair of mine was left.

Perhaps one of Giovanna's hairs was also laying around in the café. Perhaps they both were incinerated, or swept away by the wind, long before that man came in and excused himself for interrupting dinner.

But I wasn't sitting at a table on the thirteenth of November in Paris, across from an Italian woman from Verona I wished would transform into Ela. I was sitting on a couch in Biscarrosse, so safe it made me sick to my stomach. Was this how Tintin felt, at the end of all his adventures? Like he'd just barely escaped the end of his life? After all of the twists and turns, did he wonder why he'd come out alive? Perhaps everything was dependent on place, not only love. Ela wasn't in Biscarrosse, and I wasn't in Brooklyn, and we were slowly becoming parts of different stories, ones in which each of us only appeared in phone calls, in slips of video, in photos, and neither of us had enough sway over the other's life.

Just a week later, Ela wrote to me saying she couldn't travel halfway across the world for an imaginary man. I read that email in the morning, while putting on deodorant. It was the cheapest one at the store, and smelled suspiciously of gasoline. My unbuttoned shirt, the stick under my arm, I reread the email over and over. I looked out the window. I emailed the principal and let him know I had a fever, and was stuck in bed. Not a kid in Biscarrosse learned a word of English that day.

7.

The month of December, I looked at two photos.

I click on the first. Behind Ela, wire hangers held blouses in the closet. Her bedroom door closed, scarves and jackets lumping off rack hooks. The room's color, a pale yellow, made me wonder if winter sunlight broke like cheap eggs over the white walls. She arched on her knees on the bed, her left hand behind her back, her right gripping her thigh at the groin. She tilted her head to the side and looked at me, or the computer camera, from above. Impossible to see her eyes, though open, before meeting her I'd thought that hazel was just a nut.

Her legs made lines at the hips, inwards. The same lines at the inside of her elbows, and under her breasts, and in her hair. I had this epiphany, long before I looked at this photo, even before I flew to France, that Ela was the most beautiful woman of the twenty-first century.

Some guys might've gone out to celebrate, but I laid like a basketful of stale baguettes spilled over my bed, paralyzed with fear. If it was true that Ela was the most beautiful woman of my time, that meant that in a thousand years, in some wing of a clever museum, she could stand on a pedestal, just as the Roman statues did now. No wonder I was always afraid of her body. What did I do, facing the most beautiful woman of the twenty-first century? I flew to France.

It was too much to stand before a woman like her. Even if I could've smashed her to pieces, I realized, no chunk of her would contain the source of my agony. That terrified me. I

could never hope to hold what drove me madly towards her. It made me wonder how art critics decided the beauty of those Roman statues. Was the beauty hidden inside that marble stomach, or marble nose? Could I plunge my hand into a Roman statue and pull out the stuff art critics said? Or were they just imagining all of this beauty, without any proof? I was a man without proof, trembling before a woman. Perhaps it would've all been easier if Ela had been a walnut.

I could've placed her in between the teeth of the vice, spun the handle, and cracked her open. But that wasn't how love worked. That wasn't how beauty worked, either. But those past few months, I'd been trying to see just how far I could go, how slowly I could spin the handle. But I wasn't trying to break her anymore. I was trying to loosen my grip while also retaining her, and every month, I gave the handle a little nudge to the side, waiting for her to drop out.

I also sent her a nude. I couldn't figure out how to use the countdown for the tablet camera, so my arm stretched across all of my attempts, tan lines at the elbow. Behind me, there was white, unnatural light which must have also been the sun, even though there barely was any in Biscarrosse. I didn't know how to look sexy, but I knew she liked my fingers, so I laid them over my stomach, as if waiting for something to happen.

The second, taped to my wall, a photocopy of a photo my mother had shown me six months before, after the death of my grandfather. His father, my great-grandfather, had stared at me while my mother, looking from the photo to me, had murmured that we were like two drops of water. It was the first time I'd ever seen him, and I wondered if my grandfather saw his face

in mine or my face in his, because my grandfather also saw him as I did, from the photograph, his father having died in 1917, a few years after he was born.

My great-grandfather was also a lumberjack. He served as a private in the Canadian Forestry Corps during the first World War, in the Bordeaux region. I'd written about him in my essay, expressively writing *Bordeaux*, and that *my* great-grandfather had lost his *hands* to a sawing mill. How could they have possibly rejected me? He'd given his hands to the wood production of the French forces, and left my grandfather fatherless. It would've been immoral not to accept me.

The photo was a portrait from the second button of his jacket to the top of his head, where his red hair—a dark grey—was erect, combed upward. Only head and shoulders, a bust, one-third of a man, perhaps less considering the lighting, the photograph full of shadows. His jacket sleeves were creased into dark cuts. The left side of his face was toned the grey of wet concrete. When I looked at his eyes, they were so beady and dark and temporary that they resembled two windswept grains of obsidian sand.

The only thing about him that didn't avoid the light was the chain of his pocket watch, dangling out of his breast pocket, and the right side of his face, which was caught in a flash of white that carved around his right ear like the edge of a bright moon against the grainy black curtain behind him. I saw what my mother saw: we had the same nose, eyes, ears, and chin, but I also saw a man not so different from a silhouette, a man who was barely ever there, who was nearly nothing but a myth.

I kept him taped to the wall. I wasn't sure why, but perhaps because he'd once been there, in Bordeaux. Even if I used him to get hired for a job, now that I was in Bordeaux, I understood: his footsteps were out there, somewhere, in the forest.

8.

Alphonse, the only French guy Franz and I met the entire time we lived in Biscarrosse, drove a Renault van. Its green paint job, as though smudged by forests and swamps it had sped through, and had never washed off, made me feel as if Alphonse had come a long way, across all of Bordeaux, to meet me. Born and raised in Biscarrosse, after working in a hotel by the Pyrenees over the past few months, Alphonse was back. He always called and said he was ten minutes away, his windows down, the air humming in the background, but arrived a couple hours late, with something special, a little bit of hashish, a bottle of liquor. He came at a convenient time in my life, and in the life of Franz, who seemed to now be in a downward spiral, ever since his failure to secure an apprenticeship with Alejandro Jodorowsky.

I got to know the van pretty well. The jammed sliding doors, and the backseats torn out for a moving job, the rest of the van swayed back and forth behind us like an empty room on wheels. Often we joyrode to the outskirts of the village, further than I ever went on my Schwinn. Though, I doubt Alphonse would've called it joyriding. He always made up small excuses to go wherever we went, then took the most roundabout route. The only exception was the day we went looking for a new pack of tarot cards.

At the apartment, Alphonse had taken down Franz's tarot cards from the shelf, and lit one of those tall incense candles. The mood set with that stink of oily earth, he'd had intentions to read his own cards. He didn't want to wait for Franz to get back from his classes. Then Alphonse went to the bathroom, and I'd gone into the kitchen to find something to eat. I stuck my head out the window, felt the wind, and ripped a baguette bite by bite. Something

knocked over in the living room, but I kept stuffing my face, wondering what I was doing with my life.

Everywhere I turned there was a Frenchwoman. At the supermarket, I tried to memorize the fingers of cashiers—which had rings, which didn't—while they speedily ran up my groceries. The only thing they slowed at were the expensive juices with unresponsive barcodes, and still, I couldn't tell if they were married. Later, in the kitchen I chugged those juices, a hand gripping the counter, as if the thick redness of strawberry-banana could course through me, fill that hole that had gotten only bigger ever since I'd left Ela. Pot after pot of coffee, the grinds like a black magic powder, the six croissants I crammed down my throat, all consumed with the hopes of feeling less.

I looked at porn for the first time in years. Night after night I deleted my history, then woke up in the morning, disturbed by how quickly I also forgot the faces of the women, how they blurred instantly from my memory, perhaps because I always silenced their moans, because they didn't sound real, not as real as Ela. I wrote her messages pleading for her mouth, begging, to which she asked confusedly, Why my mouth? Perhaps I should've told her that in the mornings I stood under my shower until all the hot water dripped off me. That I was worried my blood cells had abandoned my body in search of one that blushed, that trembled, reacted to the world. The only patches of skin I ever felt were people's cheeks, in those brief kisses that were barely kisses. From my window, when the schoolyard filled with children, I got dressed, hoping someone might see me, vulnerable and unbuttoned. But nobody ever glanced up.

Alphonse came out of the bathroom with his black hair gelled and combed back over his head. His hair looked like one of those old school motorcycle helmets. He gave a yelp and ran out to the living room, then into the kitchen, and filled two glasses of water. He ran back into the living room, and there came a splatter, then a steamy sound.

I walked out and Alphonse sat in his bleach-spotted jeans and leather jacket, brooding in front of a pile of wet, charred cards.

Next thing I knew were going full speed to his barber, who had a pack of tarot cards lying around the shop. They wouldn't be the same tarot cards, but Alphonse was determined to replace them. I thought this might be the last straw for Franz, to lose his tarot cards, those cards he studied at the dinner table, as if he reading his own future.

We flew up one of those narrow French roads seemingly perfect, despite the two lanes, for a head-on collision. Trees slapped the windows. Alphonse asked me to steer.

I don't have a driver's license, I said, as a car grazed by.

I just want to light this cigarette, Alphonse said.

I stretched out a shaky hand and grabbed the wheel, while Alphonse went about patting himself down. I felt as if I were threading his van through the eye of a needle at sixty kilometers per hour. I had no idea how many miles that was, which made me unequivocally American, but it felt fast.

Here we are, he said, and he lit up. Wind kept fizzling out the flame, so he rolled the window up, the air humming around us sealing shut.

I don't have a driver's license, I repeated, afraid the wheel might jump out of my hands.

This is a lesson, Alphonse said. He leaned back and let the smoke of his cigarette drizzle out, over the dashboard. He looked over at me and I felt him smiling as I kept my eyes on the road, the van bumping wildly beneath us, pebbles spurting out under the tires.

Finally, Alphonse plucked my fingers off the wheel. That was how he did it: one finger after another, because my fingers were tingling so badly I couldn't do anything but keep them clutched around the wheel.

You've got to stay calm, he said.

I told you I didn't know how to drive, I said.

No, Tintin. You said you didn't have a driver's license. There's a big difference, Alphonse said, as we rolled up the boardwalk. He parked in front of the barbershop. Inside, his barber was foaming up a man's face.

I'd never been inside a barbershop—my mother had always cut my hair, and in Biscarrosse, Consuelo agreed to clip them every couple months—and I wasn't about to go inside now. I must have saved thousands of dollars by never getting a haircut, and anyway, I loved a woman's hands flitting around my head, my hair falling in heaps at my feet. I didn't trust a man to have a razor anywhere close to my face.

I looked away, at the waves tormenting the beach. That was what they looked like, crashing, over and over, into the helpless coast.

I heard the doorbell and Alphonse came out, slotting something into his pockets as he slipped back into the driver's seat.

No cards, he said, as he stuck his key in the ignition.

What'd you put in your pocket?

Never walk into a barbershop and leave emptyhanded, Tintin. It's something for Franz, just in case we don't find these cards, Alphonse said.

I ignored the spookiness of his statement. Then I said, I don't think there's much we can do. These days he hasn't got anybody to read cards to.

He's got me, Alphonse said.

True, though, ever since his clash with Alejandro Jodorowsky, he'd started to bike to the ocean. I always turned him down when he invited me. I went only once, his ponytail flapped ahead of me like a bundled-up flag. He kept turning around and yelling at me to hurry, and when we got to the ocean, he told me I was slow. I told him, for the fiftieth time, that my gears were jammed, but he just looked on at all those torturous waves. Franz had suddenly become a man who wanted to get to the ocean as fast as possible. As for me, I was trying to get as far away as possible.

You know what? I might have some cards at my place, Alphonse said.

How far is it?

Not too far, he said.

About three or four cigarettes later, I was pretty good at steering. Alphonse parked outside a tall apartment building that seemed to have been carved from a block of granite. We'd just gotten to the end of a conversation about his girlfriend, who he'd met while working at that hotel, out in the Pyrenees.

She wants to be a model, and Paris is the city for it, Alphonse said, cutting the ignition. A surly look on his face, he took out his comb, pulled the teeth through his hair a few times

on each side of his head, without a mirror, looking straight ahead at the windshield pocked with dead gnats.

Are you going to move to Paris?

It looks like I might have to. She had her first gig a couple months ago, but she hasn't had a thing since. Check it out, Alphonse said, skimming his phone for a moment. He showed me a photo of an advertisement for mineral water. His girlfriend sat at a café table and held a champagne flute. She had wavy, brown hair, and wore a silk blouse under a jean jacket. She's a Parisian, Alphonse said, so she can't stand the idea of living down south, which means I've got to be the one to move.

We walked up to the third floor, and filed our way into his studio apartment. He went across the room and flung apart the parakeet-patterned curtains. Below the window he had a desk, where a rubber chess mat was unrolled. A few pieces were strewn over the emerald and white squares, as if he'd been playing against a cloud, or himself. Soon, I would start coming to Alphonse's apartment almost every other day to play chess, but that came later.

On his twin bed, wedged into the corner, an ashtray rested on the pillow. The air reeked of a man trapped inside an apartment for weeks. Alphonse pulled out the drawers to his desk, then took down boxes from the closet shelves.

Check these out, he said, tossing me books he'd read at that hotel, French crime novels with men wearing fedoras on the front cover, or women running up thin, sunbathed alleys. I caught each one and leafed politely through the pages. I got the sensation that the books could've been blank, and still, Alphonse would be throwing them to me. I even got this image in my head of Alphonse on a bed, the Pyrenees in the window, as he turned blank pages, one

by one, until the end. And that was what mattered, wasn't it? That he had turned the pages to the very end, and that he had finished the books.

I gripped the front cover, a man in a tuxedo rowing a boat into the fog, and flipped the pages quickly, the words flurrying by, as I experienced the desire to finish something, anything. It didn't matter what happened to the man in the tuxedo, or where to he was rowing, or what he was fleeing. But when I got to the end, I felt the same as I had at the beginning, only a slight change in the weight of the book, perhaps, as I shifted it to my right palm. I was suddenly terribly hungry, and wanted to eat something, anything, to finish a plate of food, to eat an apple to its core, the seeds and the stem included, right there, in the middle of Alphonse's apartment, in January, still thousands of miles away from Ela, still incapable of telling her how I felt. A few weeks ago, in Marseille, during the fireworks, I had sat on a couch in a hostel and written upwards to twenty, twenty-five resolutions. I'd begun all of them—playing more chess, running three times a week, studying French conjugation—except for the one about being honest with Ela.

I swallowed saliva.

Here it is, Alphonse said. He held up a thin, dusty box. He lifted the lid to a pack of golden cards. I turned a few to look at the faces. They looked cheesy, nothing like the worn-out, mystical ones he'd burned.

They're not the same, I said.

What counts is that they're tarot cards, Alphonse replied, and he closed the box. We went back out and he opened the trunk of the van. He carefully placed the dusty box into the middle of the empty floor as if it were a delicate moving job, and we were travelling far.

We didn't go right away to my apartment. Sometimes I turned around to check on the tarot cards, to make sure they hadn't disappeared. When we got to my building, Alphonse bound up the stairs so fast, the bikes fell over. He thrust the piñata to the side, and it swayed, as I picked up my Schwinn. He waited at the door.

I think Franz is already home, Alphonse said. Before I unlocked the door, he wrapped his leather jacket around the box.

Franz sat at the dinner table, watching the news, a bus accident full of old people. The aerial shots showed the bus in flames on a highway. Alphonse took out from his pocket two dark pebbles of hashish, and laid them on the table.

How kind of you, Franz said, raising his eyes to him. A few minutes later, the living room was filled with a swampy smoke. I opened the living room window, and lit a cigarette to distract the voice in my head that begged to have one of those feelingless hits of Alphonse's joints. Part of me would've welcomed the idea of my head expanding like a rock, and another part of me—the one who had written those resolutions—wanted to stay sober. I listened to the conversation behind my back:

I have something else for you, Alphonse said.

What?

A gift.

These aren't mine.

But it's a gift. They're even better than the old ones. I got them from an antique shop out in Bayonne. The owner said the cards belonged to a real psychic.

I see.

Can you read me my cards? I've heard you're good.

But what happened to mine? Franz said, now an edge in his voice. I turned around to catch Alphonse lighting an incense candle in front of a stupefied Franz.

Please, I insist, Alphonse said.

I turned back to the window, and wondered for how much longer I could live like that, with Franz, Alphonse, and it was then, at that precise moment, that I saw Consuelo walking up the street. My heart lifted slightly, in that living room which smelled sweet and deadly at the same time, and I excused myself, to walk out, to bump into a woman.

9.

In February, after playing hooky two days in a row on my own classes, I woke up and began to pack. I didn't know where I'd go first, but I wanted to be real, again. New York was my final destination. After I told Ela that I'd written her a letter, she'd started to believe in us, again. And so did I, but with the French post lagging, and Ela asking me if I'd made up the twelve pages, I decided to appear on her doorstep.

Of course, I'd considered other desperate measures, searching for teleportation on Google. Some Scandinavian scientists had succeeded in sending two atoms across a room, a very small room, about the width of a few big steps. I imagined teleporting myself two atoms at a time to Brooklyn. But then I would've been a man of fractions. The Scandinavian scientists didn't pay attention to those details.

As for my job, I'd come to understand that the Ministry of Education was a labyrinth of file cabinets, and that no matter what, my paychecks would keep coming until May, and as for packing, after six months my clothes continued to spill out of my luggage.

Within minutes, I wrote a note to Franz and Consuelo, and was ready to leave behind Biscarrosse once and for all. All I had left to do was pack my chessboard. It was then I saw the chess book.

Alphonse's thin, green paperback stuck off the ironing rack, open to an endgame puzzle. Alphonse, I'd learned, used to play in national chess tournaments, until he got burnt out at fourteen. When we played, I could usually put him in a tight spot, but rarely could I mate him.

A handful of pieces lingered on the chessboard, still waiting since yesterday for the killer move. How many times did I brood over the fastest way to a checkmate, staring at the emptiness surrounding those last pieces, then stare out my window, then back at the emptiness? That was how I spent my one-thousand-four-hundred-sixteen hours.

Alphonse's name was signed on the inside cover, and he'd said he would want it back. But I couldn't bring it to him now, because any minute the lunch bell would ring, and I didn't want to bump into any teachers or kids. I sat on my luggage in the middle of my empty bedroom and lit a cigarette.

My windowpanes splayed to the walls, the recess bell ringing, I stood up, but stayed just far enough from my window ledge, just out of view of the kids. Suzanne skipped across the schoolyard, her yellow dress fluttering around her tiny black shoes. Her mother had hired me to give her private English lessons, and after going twice a week for a while, I made up an excuse about training for a marathon. Suzanne's mother, waiting by the gates, had an indecipherable gaze. Even from my bedroom, I feared her raising her eyes to my window.

I'd dreaded speaking English in her apartment. Something about it made me untouchable, as if I were made of some mysterious, unphysical matter. As if the very English I spoke diminished me, layer by layer, until I was merely a sliver of English, worth only the words in my head, the rest of me hollow. Suzanne's mother always sat outside the glass sliding doors, her blonde hair in a tight bun, her cigarette smoke rising by the side of her head. No wonder when I gave instructions in French, for those slim moments, my body tingled with the possibility of her putting those ten Euros in Suzanne's hand instead of mine, sending her out

to buy bread, and leading me back to the dining room table, where we would make love. Suzanne's mother was the closest I'd been to a Frenchwoman.

Machine guns peppered off in the distance.

For a moment, the kids seemed to intercept those faraway bullets. For a brief, absurd moment, the village lost space and time. I knew about the military base, the jeeps rolling down the streets, but I could hardly understand how the kids had unpierced bodies, how their screams were of joy. I couldn't believe my eyes. My ears told me Suzanne should've been lying on the pavement, red spots blooming over her yellow dress, her mother crouched over, fumbling her hands over the wounds, twisting a tourniquet out of her scarf, the ambulance sirens clanging instead of those church bells.

I had to sit down to distract myself from the gruesome image, and wait until the schoolyard silenced.

I pedaled my Schwinn down the vast road, relieved by the sudden emptiness of the world, apart from a few men in dark blue uniforms creeping around an apartment building. They had pistols on their belts—police officers—and they circled, waving one another on, as I rode towards the trees, the chess book pinned against the handlebars.

Alphonse lived at the end of two long roads, the first a dead-end facing the woods, the second flanked by apartment building blocks. I felt liberated, pumping my knees, barely going forward, my gears still jammed. I locked my Schwinn to a pine tree, in front of his van, and went up the stairs. After two knocks, he swung his door open. He had yet to comb and gel his

black hair, the usually old-school motorcycle helmet now unkempt. We kissed on the cheeks. The scrape of his five o'clock shadow itched my cheeks for an extra second.

Come in, he said. I was just making lunch.

I don't have much time, I said, but all my conviction slid out of my body when Alphonse put his hand on my shoulder. He ushered me in, and I jammed the chess book into my back pocket. I probably had a couple hours until the last bus, at least. He made a show of taking off my trench coat and hanging it over the hook on his door, like a servant, and busied himself at the microwave. The parakeets on his curtains moved gently, as if just a moment ago, Alphonse had pulled them back to look out the window.

Were you expecting someone? I said.

Just you, Alphonse said, giving me a wink. He brought two rectangular slices of cheese pizza on a single paper plate, and put it between us. It's my last plate, he said. We sat shoulder to shoulder, and ate the microwaved pizza slices. Over lunch we chatted about the prettiest teachers at the school.

I had Madame Pelletier when I was six, Alphonse said, and she's still beautiful. Whenever I see her in the street, I want to clean up all the dog crap for her.

I agreed, although I often imagined Madame Cézanne cornering me after the bell, pressing me against the classroom walls, the alphabet letters loosening, falling to the floor. But none of that mattered, of course, because soon, I would be on my way out of this village. I'd almost forgotten why I'd come to Alphonse's apartment, until he cleared the plates, and invited me to a game of chess.

I didn't know how to say no to Alphonse, who was already dragging his desk to the middle of the room. He tossed a bag of peanut M&Ms on the table, and prepared a mocha pot. The spout sputtered and hissed when he took it off the stove, poured us each half a mug. I unrolled the rubber chess mat and wound the clock to five minutes each.

He held out two fists, the thick, black hairs like cursive over his knuckles. I tapped his right: black—my weak side, and so it was no surprise that about halfway through the game, Alphonse raised his hand and wordlessly began to rest the board.

Do you know the King's Indian Defense? he said.

I've heard of it, I said.

It's the art of being stabbed without bleeding, he said, darting out the pieces. The emerald and white squares seemed to intensify in color under Alphonse's hands. He stopped after ten moves. Black spread to the edges, while white advanced freely, without a single obstacle, up the board.

I asked him when I was supposed to attack.

You wait as long as you can, he said, then pressed two fingers into his belly, and sucked in his breath. Behind him, his ashtray was no longer on his bed, as I remembered it. Above the twisted sheets, on the wall, there hung an Algerian flag—which hadn't been there the last time I'd come. He blew out, and it was then, when I smelled the coffee on his breath, that I wondered about this apartment—who else came, who else did he smoke that hashish with, and why did he ever come back to this depressing village? Why didn't he just make off to Paris, to reunite with his girlfriend? In short, I wondered if he was as lonely as me.

You see this pawn? It's like the tip of the knife. The closer it gets, the more white's exposed, Alphonse said. The green of an M&M sweated out into my fingertips as I rolled it round and round. For the next few games, that pawn kept advancing, deeper and deeper, into my side. I lost quickly, minutes before the end of my time, too clumsy to wait for my opponent to take a stab at me, then collapse cleverly around them without being wounded. Really, I was the one holding the knife, and the rest of the world collapsed around me, whenever I took my wild stab, whenever I wanted something badly enough to lunge.

After three losses in a row, I told him The King's Indian Defense wasn't for me.

Then what's for you? Alphonse said.

Something tricky, like the Queen's Gambit, I said. It was my only opening that put Alphonse in a vulnerable position. I loved to offer him a free pawn, there for the taking, while I pushed forward into the attack. Suddenly, I remembered my plan to leave. I stood up and said that I had to go.

So soon? Alphonse said.

Yes, unfortunately, I said, slipping on my trench coat. I hadn't expected having to say goodbye to Alphonse, a smudge of pizza sauce at the corner of his mouth, still sitting at the table, contemplating the bottom of his mug, when I thrust out the chess book to him.

You've already gone through all of it? he said, zipping a thumb at the corner of the pages. It felt strangely vicious, as if he were pulling the lips apart of a sleeping bloodhound, to show the fangs.

No, I said. I could feel my heartbeat against the buttons of my trench coat.

Keep it. I'm not the library, you know. Keep it until you can beat me, he said, and he extended the book to me. He looked up at me, and his eyes flushed with a strange brightness.

I'll keep it. But I don't know for how long, I said. When I turned around, I felt the walls of his apartment lean in around me, like those temple walls from that Indiana Jones movie, as if the studio began to get even smaller, as I made my way to the door, as if his entire apartment wanted me to stay another hour. A chess trophy winked at me from a shelf on the wall, and sunlight studded the bedsheets, making a twisted diamond of the bed. The Algerian flag seemed to cling by itself, without nails, without tape, to the wall.

Alphonse stood up to go open the door.

The closest I'd ever gotten to a man was one night, during a blizzard, when I'd trudged over to a coworker's house, down the middle of snowy streets. We'd sat up drinking whisky. I'd sat on the floor, him on the couch, and my head had been inches away from his knee. I'd thought about him taking my chin and raising it to his. But that was a long time ago, and now I just wanted the scrape of Alphonse's cheeks against any part of my body. I thought that I could just close my eyes and imagine Ela. I could erase the moment once it would happen, and when it was over, nothing would have occurred. I could just let myself go, like a knife, before him. But I also wanted to back away, knife in hand, as I looked down and shut the stink of coffee inside my mouth.

When I looked up, he looked down, and busied his hand with the door handle. Then he raised his head.

Let's play tomorrow, if you have time, he said.

I didn't have the guts to tell him I was about to take a bus and leave Bordeaux forever. At the same time, I knew I couldn't leave like this, trembling down the stairs, lurching a leg over my Schwinn, and pedaling, the chess book hanging out like a green tongue from my back pocket.

It was no wonder that a few weeks later, the first night that Consuelo touched me, I would begin to shake all over, so badly that she would put her hand to my forehead. Perhaps my loneliness was a fever, waiting for the moment to break. Or my loneliness was a pot of water without a cover, and the steam rose and rose, and finally, Consuelo had put a cover on, and I'd finally begun to boil. Slowly, and surely, my body temperature had risen from the spot her fingers had gripped on my leg.

When I got back to my apartment, I sat on my luggage, rocking back and forth, thinking of Ela, of how many more months I could last. Finally, I began to unpack.

10.

At the end of February, after going to sleep sober for the first time in five months, I dreamed of my great-grandfather. I ran through the woods in the dream. Through a clearing of stumps, I could see the lakeshore. The air denser, the very sunlight clipping through the tree branches heavier, the dirt path dry and hard with tracks from horse hooves, it felt like a different forest, and the further I ran, the closer I got to the far-off shriek of a sawblade. Then, a man stepped out from the trees.

He walked funny, but wasn't limping. His legs looked too long for his arms. He wore bulky pants, a red shirt, and he had a red cowlick, just like me.

The closer I got, the better I realized his true state, shirt gashed over in blood, wrists bundled-up in bloodstained cloth. I held onto a tree, kneeled over, my stomach clenching. But my great-grandfather didn't look in pain. A layer of sawdust made his cowlick shimmer, as if under a thin blanket of sunlight. After I finished puking, and kicked some leaves over the puke, I turned around, and there he stood, still there, drenched in blood.

Where are you off to? he said.

Italy, I said, without thinking, the back of my throat burning with the taste of butter and acid—why butter, I couldn't have said. But it was true, since my mother had planned an itinerary for Italy, and would meet me at the beginning of May, in Paris, from where we would fly to Florence.

I don't think that's a good idea, my great-grandfather said. The Austrians just broke past the Po River the other day. I would keep to these parts. You'll be safer.

For a moment, I just looked at him.

I'm sorry I can't shake your hand, he said, at last. He raised both of his arms. I hadn't heard a Quebecois accent in months, and the sound of his grated my ears. It was as if I'd gotten so used to the French accent that I'd begun, without knowing it, to reproach my own. A red drop fell from the tourniquets twisted around his wrists, spotting the dirt.

You can talk, can't you? he said, squinting at me.

Yes, I said. I felt a sudden fear that he might recognize me, as well, and what he might ask of me.

I have something to ask of you, he said, as if reading my mind. But first I need to ask you something else. Can we sit down first? Perhaps over there, he said, pointing at a fallen tree.

Yes, I said. My great-grandfather moved quickly, still the young man he was, at twenty-two, when he died.

I have a pipe and some tobacco in my left pocket. Will you take it out for me? my great-grandfather said, leaning against the trunk. He turned slightly, juttied out his hip. From his pocket I fumbled out a pouch and a wooden pipe. I packed the pipe without asking him, tamping the tobacco in with my thumb. His dark, brown eyes bore into me like the rusty tips of a pitchfork.

Do you have matches? he said. If not, I have some in my other pocket. Again, he juttied out his hip, and I pulled out the matches. Then, I held out the pipe. He opened his mouth, and between his teeth clamped the tip. My first two matches blew out just as I brought the flame to the tobacco.

I don't have that many, my great-grandfather said. Please be careful.

With the third match I got his pipe smoking, and he sucked in. The smoke dribbled out the corner of his mouth, and when he nodded to me to take out the pipe, the wood was warm.

Thank you, he said. I hope you're not in a hurry.

He looked straight ahead at a swarm of gnats clumping the air across the dirt road. Part of me considered leaving, at that moment, and another part of me wanted to stay, on that trunk until my great-grandfather bled to death. He didn't seem to be in any pain, but I knew the end of the story.

I need you to find my hands, he said, turning to me. When I didn't say anything, he said: I need you to find my hands, because I need to write to my son.

Your son, I repeated. I wanted to tell him his son had died at the age of ninety-six, about six months ago, but I held myself back. My great-grandfather held his gaze on my face, as if roving it with two metal detectors. In the distance, the pine trees hissing, then the whump, as they fell, interrupted our silence.

Can you do this for me?

I can write for you, I said. If you have a pen and paper in your other pocket, I can write, right now.

No. My son will know it's yours, and not my handwriting. He must know it's me who wrote him, not you, my great-grandfather said. I nodded and looked out, at the thicket of trees, and wondered how I would find his hands. The forest stretched for at least twenty, thirty kilometers, all the way to the next town.

Don't worry, he said. If you keep going down the dirt road, you will reach the next clearing. There, take a right, and keep walking. You'll find a sawmill there. I think my hands are somewhere there. I'll wait for you here.

Okay, I said, standing up. As I started up the road, my great-grandfather yelled at me once more.

Make sure they're clean, please, he said.

The further I got up the dirt road, the more shouts of men I heard over the tops of the trees. Once I got to the clearing, I began to wonder how I would find my great-grandfather. Judging by the sun, I had an hour before sunset. I took my t-shirt off and wrapped it around the branch of a tree by the path.

The clearing of stumps spread out before me, dotting the space ahead of me as far as the tents speckling the lakeshore. The screech of the sawmill made the air shake. Sweat slid like slugs down my back. I walked through clouds of gnats, and cursed my great-grandfather, and his hands. I should've told him his son was already dead, I thought. Sawblades as long as the wingspan of a basketball player glinted by a tree trunk whose rings must have been up to a hundred, two hundred, but I didn't stop to count.

I walked on. My eyes began to itch from all the sawdust floating in the air. Behind me, the sun began to set, and I could feel the light receding like arrows being pulled out of my shoulders. It was getting dark when I stumbled over two lumps. I kneeled down over the hands. One hand was turned palm up, and the other was turned down and crusted in pine needles. I batted away the flies flustering around. The blood had soaked the thick roots of the tree bulging out of the earth. The hands were surprisingly big, and thick, with dirt in the palm

lines. The knuckles stuck up in a ridge of little mountaintops, and under the fingernails, there was a dirty sliver, like black moons. The hairs over his knuckles were swept in the same direction, towards me.

Before picking them up, I looked around. The lake was still far, and I wanted to find a stream. Some men were singing in the distance, sitting around a fire. I got the feeling that if I ran towards the lake, I would find a stream. I picked up both hands, pressing my thumbs into my great-grandfather's palms, trying to get a good grip. By then I had hundreds of gnat bites, all over my back and arms, but I couldn't scratch them anymore.

I ran through the trees, the branches scraping my arms. When I tried to brush the sweat out of my eyes, I brushed my face with my great-grandfather's hands, and when I pushed the branches out of my face, I pushed with my great-grandfather's hands.

Those last arrows of sunlight fled from the trees, the deeper I got into the forest, until a rushing of water over stones whispered just beyond a row of trees. I stepped into a stream up to my calves, and bent down to scrub the hands. I let the cold water pass through the wrists. My calves went numb as I stood there, washing between the fingers, even digging my nails under his, to dig out those dark rings. They were puffy and wrinkled when I finished. Before I left, I kneeled down in the water, and let the stream rush over my chest and back. Then I stood up, and began to run back through the trees, back to my great-grandfather.

It was dark by then. The lake was a black disk over which the stars pricked little glimmers, and all I could see in the darkness were small fires and the backs of men leaning over the fires. By the time I reached the end of the clearing of stumps, and my t-shirt, and the

dirt path, the gnats had begun to swarm around the hands, around me, clouding me, and it was then, at that moment, that I woke up.

I wanted to go back to sleep, to return to that dream, to find my great-grandfather, but I lay in bed, raised my own hands before my face, and studied them until they no longer seemed to belong to me.

11.

What would an imaginary man have done? Consuelo stood in the doorway of my bedroom, looked at me, and said, in French, she wanted to burn all the paper in my room. Something inside my chest, just beneath my heart, some hidden organ, perhaps, unlocked like a little silver box. Inside the silver box: desire. If she'd spoken in Spanish, I wouldn't have understood a word. If in English, I might've take a step backwards, uncomfortable with the sudden change in language. I should note that Consuelo was also a woman whose weapon of choice in a duel was a labyrinth. If she had to kill a man, she would put him in a labyrinth, watch him try to find his way out. That also seemed just how I'd spent the last seven months, as if Ela, or Consuelo, or some other woman, a goddess, perhaps, had been watching me walking around in an endless figure-eight, trying to figure out in which direction I should go. Consuelo's hair smelled like cigarettes. And she jutted her chin out like the end of a broken beer bottle.

What would an imaginary man have done? It could've been all over in fifteen minutes or less, I thought. It was April. I'd seen a man on a balcony, just as well, tearing a bread slice to pieces, tossing it to the pigeons below. I'd been even jealous. I also wanted to feed something to the birds. I hadn't known what, until now.

An imaginary man pulled out my nightstand drawers, and emptied them one by one: a metro map of Paris, a deck of cards, ATM slips, the top halves of oversized coffee filters he snipped every morning just so they could fit in the machine, all into a pile in the middle of my room. He grabbed the Ministry of Education letters, the kid drawings, and the passport photocopies. That would've all been fine with me. Let it burn, I would've thought, let it burn.

The imaginary man would've even tossed in his real passport. The one with the stickers from the doctor's appointment at the immigration office in Bordeaux. He'd gone with Consuelo, arriving early in the morning to the city, only to drift around, and she'd tried to teach him the colors in Spanish. She'd peeled a clementine outside a cinema, where he'd just wanted to go and sleep, the earliest show still hours away. Orange, she'd said, in Spanish, teasing him with a slice in her palm. Not until you say it, she'd said, when he reached for it, but he said that they were in France, and that he would only speak French.

After the doctor's appointment, she flipped through her passport to the medical sticker, and a homeless man had stumbled over to ask if he could touch her Argentinean passport. He had a face like a cartoon bomb had just exploded in his thick, grubby fingers. He explained in French that his parents were Argentinean, and he just wanted to touch the coat of arms. Consuelo held out her passport, and the man stroked the cover, thanked her, and walked away.

What it felt like to be trusted, the imaginary man might have wondered, as he tossed in the Plan B pill instructions, and remembered, sorely, and shamefully, how he sometimes wished Consuelo would forget to take the pill. As if that would somehow become a reason for them to stay, in Biscarrosse, or somewhere else, anywhere else, in this country. But her visa was expiring, and anyway, she now hated France.

At the bottom of me, which was sometimes hard to find, I ignored the bad nights. That night she threw the last bottle of Languedoc into the lake, shouted she didn't give a fuck about France, about Europe, and the sky seemed to blow a fuse, the stars shutting off. Rowboats slacked in the water. The bottle gurgling back to the surface, I followed Consuelo down the road, past the grainy light of lampposts. In the kitchen, Franz tried to talk some sense into her,

but she kept ranting about her hatred for Europe. Then she flicked a lighter on and off under my chin, and said she hated me as well.

The imaginary man, on his hands and knees, grabbing the balled-up wax paper bags croissants came in under the bed, asked Consuelo if she had that lighter.

Yes, she said. Then she went to shut off the smoke detector, and the gas, and open the windows. The imaginary man threw in the band-aids his mother had insisted he bring, and his birth certificate.

He didn't have any money to burn.

It would take him another moment to remember the photocopy of the photo of his great-grandfather, taped to the wall. He would take it down and hold it in his imaginary hands for a moment, studying the face that was almost his own. Perhaps Consuelo would ask him who it was, and he would tell her.

Maybe you shouldn't burn that, she would say.

I have to, the imaginary man would reply.

He would feel light. As if all this paper had been weighing him down, tethering him to the world. A paper trail. He would become, with a flame, unfollowable. Finally, the inky riddle of himself would float off into the air, out the window. There would be nothing and no one that could keep track of him in a few more minutes. Outside, a lycée boy did wheelies on his motorbike, round and round a lycée girl. A mass of clouds hung restlessly like silver bellies bulging from a fishnet hauled over a boat. As the imaginary man felt the first traces of warmth against his shins, he saw a drawing of a bird. It was Suzanne's drawing. The bird was as big as a man and stood on the grass, its wings outstretched, in the drawing. The imaginary man

watched the flames curl the edges of the paper, and chew into the red and green crayoned bird, until finally, it blackened completely into a thin, dark fist.

12.

The November attacks barely crossed my mind when I decided how to spend my March break, so, stepping out of the Paris-Gare-de-Lyon, the soldiers standing on street corners surprised me. But I barely paid attention to their berets and combat boots, the raindrops dripping off the end of the barrels of their assault rifles. I had other stuff to think about. Ela and I had both admitted to sleeping with someone else. It's just sex, we told each other. She with the married cook from her restaurant, and me with Consuelo, who told me she had to do some thinking.

What Consuelo actually said was: I'll write to you when the waters are clear. Then she got on a bus, embarking on her trip to Madrid to party with some old Argentinean friends. The waters were blurry, especially considering the impending expiration of our visas. A rainbow skidded over the sky like a car tire, and I walked backwards, on my heels, all the way back to my apartment. I couldn't let it out of view.

If I was going to compulsively check my email and drift around, better to do it in Paris, I thought, where Alphonse had moved just a short while ago, to finally live in the same city as his girlfriend. He had a job selling electricity door to door, and he was taking the week off, going down south in a day or two, so I could stay in his studio for the week. I called him from the Belleville metro station.

Walk past the whores, then take a left, he said. I asked him how I would know where they—prostitutes, I said—began or ended. You'll know, he said, then hung up.

Alphonse was right.

We kissed on the cheeks. His studio was a chambre de bonne I had to duck to get into, and keep ducking until I sat down on the couch. His parakeet curtains from his old apartment seemed to overwhelm the tiny window, from where stretched the roofs of Paris. Above the television, on a shelf stood a half-bottle of chartreuse.

Finish it if you want, Alphonse said, following my gaze. It'll be easier for me to pack. He put a plate of croissants and some strawberry jam on the coffee table, then said, I'm getting out of here as soon as possible.

Where to?

Anywhere else, he said. I almost feared his fingers might get stuck like the teeth of a comb as he ran his hand through his hair, asking me what my plans were for the week. I looked away from the chartreuse and shrugged.

You know the monks make that stuff, he said. They have a secret recipe from centuries ago, and they're still the only ones who know how to make it. But listen, you can't only drink chartreuse in Paris. I have a proposition for you.

Alphonse chewed into a croissant.

I'm listening, I said.

I want you to go to a movie on Friday. The movie, he said, now chewing with his mouth open, is playing at this old movie theater called Ciné Belgrand. It's one of those old-school places with seating. I've already got you a ticket.

Why do you want me to go to this movie? What movie is it, anyway?

You interrupted me. I was just getting to that. It has seating, right, and my girlfriend is going. She and one of her artsy friends. They're going to be sitting at D6 and D7, Alphonse

said, grabbing a half-torn letter and uncapping a pen with his teeth. He drew a box, and marked the seats. And if you agree, he said, you'll sit here, at C3.

I leaned back against the couch, and asked him what his girlfriend's name was again.

Charlotte, he said.

And how are you and Charlotte?

We're fine, he said, but this artsy friend has me nervous. He's a poet. Would you let your girlfriend go out with a poet?

I looked at the strawberry jam gleaming on the knife and thought seriously about which was worse, a married cook or a poet.

I already got you a ticket, Alphonse said, pushing the ticket across the table. You'll have a diagonal view of them, he said, but I don't want you to do anything. Just watch them. That's not illegal, is it?

Can I watch the movie too? I asked.

Of course, Alphonse said, tapping the ticket with his finger, LOVE printed in capital letters. Of course, that's the most important part, he said.

Before he left, I asked him where his bed was.

You're sitting on it, he said, picking up his backpack, throwing me the keys, and leaving me alone in his chambre de bonne.

The couch was long enough to fit my whole body, but those first few nights, I slept badly. The ceiling was alarmingly close, so when I got up, I had to be careful not to bang my head. This was probably how the pharaohs felt in their tombs, I thought. Then again, they were dead. But

those tombs were big, weren't they? Just in case they were alive, or some part of them was alive, so they could move around, enjoy their lives in the underworld. Or at least that was the little I could remember from my high school history class.

It was hard to stop dwelling on Ela's nervousness in our videocalls during her breaks, the kitchen door behind her. The screen blurred her red lipstick, and that made me jealous—the vision of her, the precision of her mouth. I didn't care about the married cook. Still, I ended up drinking two fingers of chartreuse nightly as if I did care, as if I were that sort of guy. I could imagine him standing at the bottom of her stairs after a shift, his knives sealed in his backpack. She didn't love him, but I couldn't have done a thing to stop the snow from peeling off his boots, or his fist from knocking on her door.

Anyway, for me, he was less than solid. Even less than liquid. He was like the chartreuse floating like a green gas in the bottle. He hissed into her apartment. How could she touch a man barely heavier than air?

He was repeatable, a bunch of herbs fermented by the monks, and voilà, the married cook. Did I think about busting into a monastery and stealing that secret recipe and burning it? Maybe I just wanted to get drunk, because the chartreuse poured and poured, and Ela opened and opened that door, and day after day, apart from refreshing my inbox, I wandered to the chess park.

It wasn't until that Friday evening that I realized the old men on the benches were pimps. It took me four days. No wonder at the chess park I stood back and watched, afraid of missing moves, of falling for traps. I suddenly felt them watching me through their

newspapers. Like cartoon detectives, or cartoon pimps, with holes cut out for eyes. They were plainly pimps that evening, on my way to Ciné Belgrand.

It wasn't a bad deal, I thought. I needed to distract myself from the waiting games of my life, from waiting for the clarity of water, or rather for Consuelo to decide whether to continue our doomed relationship or not, waiting whether or not to give a damn about a backpack of knives and a wedding ring floating in Ela's apartment, waiting to know which woman I should love.

Ciné Belgrand seemed to sag under its own weight, as if at any minute the roof might cave in. Alphonse was right, it really was one of those old cinemas, with dead moths clinging to the lightbulb letters. At the ticket booth, a geezer had a pegboard of the seats. He squeezed in a tiny scroll of paper into C3, while I counted the number of seats to D6 and D7, yet to be filled with a tiny scroll. Past the curtains, I settled into my seat, and waited.

All I knew about *Love* was that Gaspar Noé was the director and that Charlotte and the poet had specifically chosen this film. People swept in and settled into their seats. Outside the rain hit the roof, and its tip-tap echoed in the theater. A minute or two before the start, they arrived, both illuminated by the green screen. I'd never met Charlotte, but as people squeezed in to let her by, I could see her apologetic smile, a long coat folded on her arm, and her wavy, brown hair. As for the poet, he had a cleanshaven face, and his wet jacket shimmered.

They sat down without touching.

The movie was basically a porno flick about a couple in Paris. Everything went wrong after a threesome with the neighbor, who got pregnant, and things spiraled out of control, at

night clubs, in the backs of taxis, and within twenty minutes, I had an erection. I moved around and tried to slip it under the waistband of my boxers. I studied Charlotte and the poet, but their faces were like limestone façades. It's like they're reading magazines in a waiting room at the dentist's office, I thought. But the magazines have orgasms and bathroom sex, I also thought. The poet was thinking about dead puppies, I finally concluded. That was what I used to do, back in high school, when I was sitting with a girl, and she touched my leg. I would think of cute, black puppies, that could barely open their eyes, all slaughtered, and I would go limp, right away.

Charlotte and the poet didn't help each other out of their seats, or touch the other's elbow, as they filed their way out behind the line of people.

Outside, they rolled cigarettes. I hunched down to tie and untie my shoe until they walked down Avenue Gambetta. Smoke billowed above their head in the damp air. They walked with their hands inside their pockets, and only took them out to pick their cigarettes off their lips. They began to graze shoulders, and I got close enough to hear what they were saying.

There's no way I can make it by then, the poet said.

You'll just have to go fast. The streets are empty at this hour, Charlotte said.

Can't you bring it?

I can't. Alphonse is back tomorrow, and I told him we'd take a walk in the park.

Ah, the poet said. They'd begun to slow down, to let me pass. I stopped to light a cigarette, and rubbed my hands together. Down the street, they kissed on the cheeks—kisses

as dry as chalk, it seemed, from where I stood, and the poet turned left, and Charlotte's brown hair waved down the Belleville metro station stairs.

I ran down the street, turned left. The poet was walking quickly down Avenue Camus. I only had a Euro on me, and jumping the turnstiles seemed like a bad idea.

The poet stopped at a kebab place. I went in and stood right behind him. Over his shoulder, the kebab meat spun slowly on the pike. He ordered a falafel wrap and a Coke, then went to sit down at one of the orange tables. I ordered a kebab with some Moroccan sauce and a glass of ice water.

The poet rolled himself a cigarette and went out to smoke. He came back in, took his tray, and sat and ate. I did the same, but I kept an eye on him. We were facing each other, separated by three tables. His cleanshaven face looked especially pale under the ceiling lights. When some sauce fell on his finger, he licked it. Outside, it started to rain. I considered following the poet all the way to wherever he was going. I suddenly realized that whenever I gazed at the poet, I imagined the married cook, as if I were slipping the lenses of a microscope over him, adjusting the focus.

But ultimately, I went out, into the rain. I felt like an idiot.

My landmarks had gone to sleep, or at any rate to bed, and after walking for a while, I asked a soldier for directions. I couldn't remember the address. I had to ask him where the prostitutes were, which only caused confusion. Eventually I found my way back to that chambre de bonne. At the bottom of the stairs, I looked up and suddenly desperately wanted them to lead to Brooklyn. I felt my stomach turn as if I were at the bottom of a rollercoaster,

on the verge of shooting up. Then I went up, slowly. I undressed, and hung my clothes on the chair. I sat on the couch naked with a glass of chartreuse. I opened my tablet.

To say I felt happy about that email from Consuelo would've been untrue. I felt miserably happy. I knew she would leave, once her visa expired. Then what would I do? In Brooklyn, a married cook was naked in Ela's apartment. And the truth was, even if I'd been there, and seen through that green cloud of him, and seen Ela, I still wouldn't have said a word. The waters are clear, I would've said, perhaps. The waters are clear, and this new pounding in my chest—like my heart knows something I don't—is too far for you to hear.

13.

Consuelo and I stood outside my apartment, trying to decide whether or not we should hang the piñata from one of the trees in the yard. We wanted to cheer up Franz by celebrating his thirtieth birthday, to fill the piñata with cigarettes, mini-liquor bottles, and even some hashish, and hang it right there, in the yard, and give him a baseball bat. It was then that we realized we shouldn't give Franz a baseball bat, and the tree we stood under was a walnut tree.

It was April, and orange flowers as delicate as butterfly wings bloomed along the short stone wall surrounding the yard. We talked in whispers, because nearby, Franz, having learned from Alphonse, cooked with pastis, tipping the bottle over the meat that quivered like leaves on the grill. While he whistled a patriotic tune, I kneeled down in the grass and picked up the green shell of a walnut.

It felt light in my hand, like a tennis ball I could throw at a wall, and would jolt back to me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten a walnut. Perhaps a couple years ago, back when my grandfather was still healthy. Back when he was leaning against the hilt of his axe, out behind his house in Quebec, after chopping firewood. He pushed the back of his hand across his forehead and left a dark sweep. I was twenty-four, sitting on the backsteps. Big flies from the farm down the road bummed around the yard like lost bullets, not sure who to pierce, under a sky interrupted only by transmission towers, and in the distance, a church steeple. The sun was hot on both of our faces, and yet, I don't remember a single thing either of us said, both of us facing one another, in that backyard. Walnut trees never gave much shade, but they

stood behind my grandfather like a group of grandsons he didn't have. After all, he had only me.

Me, the grandson from New York state. Who didn't talk much French, and who sat on those backsteps, waiting for him to talk, because I never did have the guts to start a conversation. My mother had gone to the supermarket to buy ham and cheese. And my grandfather and I stared at each other, as if waiting for my mother to get back, to hear the slow wisp of wheels against the grass in the yard.

I turned the dark fuzz of the shell around in my palm. At my back, Franz kept whistling. The walnut shell was so soft, I didn't need a vice, not even a hammer. I thought that it was probably unripe. I looked over to Consuelo and asked what she thought.

I don't know, she said.

I shouldn't get sick, I said, and I dug a fingernail into the skin of it and began to claw the shell open. It was barely a shell at all, its green skin easy to puncture. It was fleshy, and once I got my nails in, it peeled back in mushy wedges. I put it into my mouth and began to chew. It was soft and dry, and within seconds, it sucked all the moisture out of my mouth. I started to yack on all fours into the grass. It felt as if I'd crammed a handful of dirt into my mouth. Oxygen tried to wriggle its way down my throat, but nothing went in. I started to cough, hard, and Consuelo asked me if I was alright. I couldn't answer. She ran into the apartment and came back down with a glass of water. I had my two fingers in my mouth, and I was trying to puke. Franz had stopped whistling, and all I could hear was this ringing in my ears, as if the air were clanging bells just inside my earlobes.

Drink this, Franz said, you fool. I could feel the blood in my entire body rushing up to my face. I was afraid of sitting up, of tilting my head ninety degrees, but Franz shoved me up with a hand, and put the glass at my lips. I sat against the tree trunk and breathed. The water felt good down my throat, parting the walnut mush. Speaking French always felt like a sudden dryness, like a mashed-up, unripe walnut trying to kill me.

We never filled the piñata. Instead, we went into the woods to celebrate Franz's birthday. I led the way. We went single-file between bushes and swarms of gnats, each carrying our own bottle of Languedoc. It was night, and on the dirt road we passed the silhouettes of sleeping roosters and donkeys behind wire fences. About halfway to the hunting sign, we turned into the forest.

We drank our wine standing. It was so dark, the pine trees seemed to have given up thrashing in an oil spill, and had gone motionless. Somehow, we got to talking about our futures. Then again, it was inevitable, because we had almost nothing else to discuss. In just a few days of time, Franz would leave, and after that, Consuelo would leave, and I would be left alone, waiting for my mother to arrive in Paris, from where we would then fly to Italy.

Consuelo and I tried to cheer Franz up the best we could, but he began to cry, softly, standing by a tree trunk, in the dark. Nothing had worked out for him in France. We patted him on the back. He wiped his tears away, rolled a cigarette in the dark, the weary drunkenness of his face, and those bullfrog eyes of his glowing at me, as we talked about the details of his departure, whether he was going to take the bus, and the train to Bordeaux, or try to catch a ride with Alphonse, and at what time his flight left, and how many hours of layover he had in

Madrid, and etcetera. All we had left in common was the fact that we were leaving Biscarrosse, and once he got to Santiago, we both knew we would probably never speak to each other again.

14.

On Ela's birthday, I said goodbye to Consuelo at the Bordeaux Airport. I watched her giant purple backpack disappear behind the security-check doors, then stumbled down the stairs and collapsed on a steel bench. I watched a boy run back and forth with a toy plane I wished would fall and smash to pieces.

The knowledge of where I had been and what I had been doing precisely one year before that day floated above my head like a grand piano: the night before my allergy attack, Ela and I had gone to dinner with her girlfriends at one of those authentic Italian restaurants where the servers were also Italian, and moved around two-dimensionally, side-stepping between the tables. All I remembered about our dinner was Ela's hand on my knee while I ate caviar, and the moment I realized I didn't have enough cash to cover the check, her girlfriends tilting their noses down to their purses.

At the table across from us, a woman argued loudly with her two fellow diners, another woman, and a man in thick black-frame glasses. Everyone else in the restaurant pretended nothing was happening, even as the woman's voice rose higher and higher, and then, finally, when she threw down her linen and stormed out. The man and the woman sat very still, as if in a museum exhibit. The glasses of red wine seemed darker than normal, and the three entrées remained untouched, the man and the woman sitting like wax figures, so still that a few minutes later, it was jarring to see the man pick up his fork.

One year later, a boy held onto a toy plane and flew from one end of the terminal to the other. I smushed two croissants down my throat, chugged an espresso, then got on a

shuttle full of jetlagged people and baggage. Everything seemed to slow down, as if I suddenly had the power to hold the world in my gaze, the buildings rubbing past the window a few extra seconds, the swirling grain of cement on the walls. It was Ela's birthday, and I still had yet to call. At the train station, I watched the sunset over the roofs of hotels across the street. I listened to a homeless man tell a story about how he lost everything on his travels from Africa, across Spain, and finally, to France. He brandished his espresso cup, a red drop sloshing out, onto the white pavement. I ate a kebab, sat on a stone bench, the stink of goat cheese drifting out from the train station. I went down the street, stepped into a tobacco store, bought an international card, held it over a garbage can, tracing the seventeen digits I had to dial before calling Ela's number, let it go.

I caught the train to the nearest station to Biscarrosse.

I knew already that the last bus had departed for Biscarrosse hours ago. I knew already that I would have to walk twenty-three kilometers back to my apartment. And that was what I did, until I stumbled into my building, the piñata hovering in the darkness, above the stairs.

I was so exhausted that I barely noticed the absence of my Schwinn. It wasn't leaning against the stairs. Consuelo was gone, my Schwinn was gone, and all I had left were some Languedoc bottles I'd promised Franz to take to the recycling depot, and the last six days of my lease, before the soldiers moved in for the summer, and this piñata, hanging over everything.

I travelled for a week around France, trying to avoid the inevitable conversation with Ela. I had a pomegranate beer in Narbonne. I met some Americans in Marseille who stunk up the

hostel with hardboiled eggs. I stayed on the move, as if my only mission was to spend my last paycheck. The only thing left to do in Biscarrosse was to clean up my apartment, talk to Ela over my tablet, and pack my bags, but on my way back I stopped in a village named Parentisse, on the other side of the lake.

I stayed at Le Relais, one of those hotels that doubled as a café, down the street from the shore. I could've just walked over there, but that first night, I stayed in the café. The barwoman had her elbows on the counter, a cigarette drizzling smoke around her head.

I had dinner in my room, a few slices of chorizo sausage I cut with a knife, then fell asleep without brushing my teeth. In the morning, I saw the sausage quivering in the semidarkness. I sat up in bed and squinted. The entire plate, knife, and sausage were trembling. It took me another minute to realize the little dark spots moving along its edges were ants. That got me right out of bed, and down the stairs.

I thought about complaining to the barwoman, but she looked as if she hadn't slept, her elbows still on the counter. I was the only person in the hotel, early for the tourist season, and I didn't want to be the only person to complain.

I went out for a walk. I kept to the shade of the white buildings slanting over the sidewalk. Ahead of me, a girl walked. A couple hundred feet down the road, a boy in tight red shorts raced at her on a bike, at full-speed. His body wobbled from side to side, he was pedaling so fast. But he wasn't wearing tight red shorts—the bike was red, and his tight shorts were white. The girl jumped back as he screeched to a halt, whipping the wheels sideways at the last second. It was a mountain bike, and along the bar across the middle, it said SCHWINN.

Trying to scare me? she said. She must have been about sixteen, the boy as well. I moved to the side and my shoulder rubbed against the grainy building. I looked at my Schwinn and the whole bike seemed to stretch before my eyes, like a long, red blur.

It never was truly mine, and perhaps it belonged more to the boy than me. He'd at least fixed the gears. Perhaps it was meant to be stolen. The boy smirked at the girl. He kissed her long and slow, as I passed them. A boy in tight white shorts stole my Schwinn and kissed a girl in front of me, I thought, and nobody knew, nobody but me. This made me feel a little better—that nobody else knew—as I went to a café and sat down.

I ordered an espresso.

It tasted black and burnt, and made me think of what Giovanna had said about French coffee. I put down a few coins, but I didn't get up right away. I sat there for a while, sliding up the coins in my fist and dropping them back onto the table.

I walked by a bullfighting stadium. There was music coming from inside, and I wandered in, past a few people at the door. It didn't seem like I had to pay, so I just drifted in. Below, on a crude wooden stage set in the sand, a band tuned up. A crowd sat all around the stadium. Most of the people had hard, shiny skin from the first couple weeks of spring. The sun glinted off their arms and faces, and I felt surrounded by a new species of humans that were part lizard, part man. The band started playing a song. The lyrics, too fast for the singer, made him sound drowsy and drugged, like a beggar fumbling for words, and for a moment, I thought he was singing in patois. It took me until the chorus to realize he was singing "Californication" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The lizard-humans around me rocked back and forth in their seats. At the end of the song, applause pitter-pattered around the stadium.

Then the band started again, the same song, “Californication”. I hadn’t eaten anything since the sausage from last night, I realized, and I could feel the bottom of my stomach flat and spread like a sheet of newspaper. The singer really did seem drugged now, or half-asleep, along with the guitarist, and drummer, playing a cover twice in a row in a bullfighting stadium. I edged out past hard, scaly knees.

I wandered down the streets, towards Le Relais, but when I reached the hotel, I kept going.

Tintin would probably come to die in Parentisse, I thought. After a life full of adventure, he would exile himself to this village in the uncharacteristically civil search for peace and quiet, and his little white dog could walk along the shore in the mornings. The foamy water would erase their footsteps. They would have no fears of a sandy trapdoor, and nobody, not even the locals, would recognize them. Tintin’s cowlick would be grey and stiff, and the little white dog deaf and blind, barking at everything and nothing. An unglamorous and bloodless end to a barely believable life.

Or perhaps the barwoman would knock at his door with a pistol hidden under the silver dome of a food tray, and say, Revenge for breakfast! Or the bike thief would chomp on a cigar as a grand piano hovered by a rope over Tintin, laughing from the seat of the Schwinn, his girlfriend under his arm. Something would have to happen, because that was how Tintin’s life worked. Bullets would whizz by, ambushes thwarted. How many times was he knocked out by a fist or a gas, and later awoke roped up in some Spanish dungeon, or on a train track, or in a coffin floating in the sea, and then, somehow, with luck or wit, wriggle his way out?

Tintin would never have a life of peace and quiet. He would have to face the rest of the world.

At the shore, I looked across the water. I could see the small glint of light from the sun hitting off the seaplane museum. The pine trees swayed along the road like snakes crawling up towards the sky. I could even see myself, sitting on a bench, alone, eating an expired bag of wasabi peanuts until my mouth burned. I could see myself choking on a walnut. I could see my great-grandfather on a dirt path, asking me to go find his hands. And I could even see tomorrow, when I would finally arrive to my apartment, and climb up the stairs and almost bump into the piñata, but at the last second, as always, duck.

I could see, inside my kitchen, those Languedoc bottles crowded together like bowling pins, waiting to be taken to the recycling depot. I could see me looking at the red couch and thinking it was the color of congealed blood. Me, taking a couch cushion and throwing it on the living room floor. Me, lying down on the floor, opening my tablet. The emptiness of the entire apartment building around me, the only spot radiating on a heat map.

I could see Ela's face over the screen.

I could see myself saying, Happy birthday.

Her saying, Thanks.

Me saying, I'm not sure if I'll stay in New York after Italy.

Ela cutting me off. Ela becoming jagged, the pixels crisscrossing one another, her eyes no longer the color of her eyes, her face made of chunks of ice drifts, sliding this way and that, in the slowing Wi-Fi.

I sat down in the sand. For the first time in years, I cried.

15.

Go do this to another woman, Ela said. Then she hung up on my face. Nine minutes and nine seconds. I rated the call five stars, and close my tablet. I lied motionless on my living room floor, a red couch cushion under my chin. The abrupt end to the conversation made me realize how prostrate I was. It felt like waking up in a knocked-over telephone booth.

I lit a cigarette.

It didn't feel like she'd left me, regardless of the things she'd said. Perhaps it would've felt different if she'd shut a door and walked right out of this apartment. Or perhaps I'd prepared myself for this—I'd been preparing myself for this for ten months. As I stood up, some ash tumbled onto my khakis. Trying to rub out the stain only made a ghastly greyness over my crotch.

The only tangible thing between us was stuck in limbo: the letter. By then, it had to be on its way back to my hands. It only depended on how fast it got there, on how soon I packed my bags. Either way, I hoped the soldiers—not me—would receive it.

I opened a window.

Once, Franz had held a cigarette butt like a piece of chalk and drawn a vortex on the concrete ledge. Then he'd stood back from his spiraling, crumbly circle, and declared that life had no beginnings or endings, and we were merely repeating the actions of people before us. The other day, I'd learned that centuries ago, Bordeaux had been a marshland. The first inhabitants wore berets and moved on stilts, then planted pine trees to suck out the swamps.

I reckoned they were the same trees that my great-grandfather later chopped down. But if Franz was right, I probably would've walked right out the window, out over the air, my footsteps ten feet high. I didn't want to be my great-grandfather because I didn't want to lose my hands, and I didn't want to haunt anyone. It would've been better to disappear. To move without a trace, with legs long enough to be a giant, an unfollowable giant moving above the sinking earth.

Biscarrosse was silent, but the air was not. The sky had a mechanical hum, the noise of city traffic carrying through the countryside, up to the coastal towns, where it then probably vanished in the slap of waves. Along the sidewalk, lampposts glowed weakly in the dark like the helmets of miners marching down an endless tunnel. Some clods of soil remained on the ledge from where a few days ago a gust of wind pushed the geraniums. Two floors down the clay pot tilted over the grass, somehow unbroken, as if it had yet to land. The day before her flight, Consuelo mysteriously brought over the red flowers. When I asked her why—everyone was leaving—she said it was unlucky to leave a home empty.

The clods of soil bore into my palm, stretched out the window. How soon could a man fall in love with another woman? I picked up my tablet and typed her name into Google search. There was a song called “Consuelo” by Ricardo. I clicked on the music video and watched Ricardo sing on stage in a bar in some European city. With a woosh his spirit stepped out of his body, and suddenly, there was Ricardo singing at the bar, and a second Ricardo stepping out the backdoor. The second Ricardo hopped on a venomously blue moped, drove up a thin, puddled alley, then turned left onto a street. The original Ricardo kept on singing at the bar, and the only words I understood were Consuelo. I tried to catch *naranja* in the lyrics while the

second Ricardo hopped off the moped to help a man cut some dead fronds off a palm tree, then took a detour to buy a bottle of rum, and two lottery tickets, one for himself, and one for the liquor store owner. They scratched them together, and both lost. The original Ricardo kept singing, now more desperately, his spit flying over the microphone, as he chanted Consuelo, Consuelo, Consuelo. The second Ricardo arrived, finally, to the beach, and bought a blanket from a thin boy, then laid the blanket over the sand, sat in front of the waves. Both the first and second Ricardo began to sing together, at once, belligerently. I tried not to sing aloud with the chorus, but I couldn't stop myself. Instead of geraniums, I wished I also had a venomously blue moped waiting for my second self. I played the song again.

I put the soil into my pocket. Above, fruit flies began clinging to the ceiling, but I didn't close the window.

I refreshed my inbox.

There was an email from Ela, sent twenty minutes ago. Short enough to read without clicking. No subject, only six words: Do not contact me again.

For a moment, I held still. So still I could feel all of my selves packed inside of me, with nowhere to go. Then I got up to go look for something to drink.

All I had was rosé.

I gave the glass a little shake. Back on the couch cushion, I braced myself, though for what I was no longer sure—for Ela's word to sink in, to leave this apartment once and for all, for this smoky stain on my crotch to come out, for the night to end. Whichever one it was, I lingered there, legs loosely crossed like a disheveled monk, wondering what, if I had one more phone call, I would've said.

You know, there's a forest where I go running. Down a dirt road to the hunting sign. There, before turning around, I always stretch and imagine two possibilities: the first, a stray bullet tearing through the wilderness and making a sucking sound into my chest; the second, the stray bullet likewise tearing past the pine trees but at the hunting sign plunks to the ground. I imagine a shotgun slug, still hot when I pick it up. But it's always the first possibility—the writhing in the mud, waiting for someone to come save me—that makes me turn and run fast as I can back to where I came from.

I guess I'm telling you this, Ela—I must have at least until nightfall in Brooklyn, until our time zones meet in the middle—because on your birthday I walked through that forest. From the other side, where the hunting happens, a story perfect for your suicidal hotline shift. The telephone is probably already ringing. Pretend it's me, and I first tell you about leaving her, then about the train that only went so far, and how my shoes seemed ready to crack and split under me, and how the shadows of trees swam over the pétanque courts, the sand choppy enough to have sucked down the men who toss small silver balls that glint even on cloudy days. The twenty-three kilometer sign was the same number after ten months. How many miles that was, I still couldn't say, making me unequivocally American. But at least I had legs and feet. And a thumb to limply stick out whenever a car came up the road. But now I know nobody should pick up a man walking away from a woman.

Let him walk. Let him be afraid of the dark, and let him light a cigarette to ward off any boars. Let him step onto the same dirt road the hunters step on at dawn. And Ela, every

few paces, let him look over his shoulder, hoping, somehow, the sound of his footsteps belong to you.

You almost hang up. I get it—you don't want to hear about me leaving another woman, but I promise it's not about her. You hold the telephone out to make my voice small. You have other callers, mostly men, I remember you saying, who threaten to kill themselves if you don't listen to their sexual fantasy. Keep them on hold and bring the telephone closer, make my voice big as the countryside, how the sudden emptiness of the world gave me the impression of wandering through myself, or across the distance between us. Tractors in fields, a wood factory on the horizon, the sway of pine trees, and the path never taken from you now a dirt road to take until my knees could no longer bend. As if instead of her I was walking away from you.

Your ears hurts, and the blood has drained out of your pinky from wrapping the telephone cord around it. How can I continue this conversation? How much longer before you become someone I never speak to again? Before I talk about you as a woman I once knew? Out your window, have you noticed the floors dimming in the office buildings? Somewhere in that forest in Bordeaux, just as traces of sunlight spread across the sky, a hunter pulled a trigger. For a brief moment, the gunshot compressed the air into the only sound. I wished you could have heard it, from somewhere safe, Ela, where there was no need to run, where at last I stood on pavement.

A glittering marble flew in hard and fast. It shot in, skidded across the floor, then stopped and buzzed.

Another shot in, whirred around the room, hit a wall. Five floorboards apart, two beetles writhed helplessly on their backs. I'd never seen them before, but they were fat and orange.

Fat and *naranja*. They kicked their tiny legs against the air. I picked one up, felt it kicking in my fist, and walked to the window.

I knew, now, it was dark on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, and yet I still couldn't understand what would happen to all the things I'd never said to Ela. Where does all our unsaid go? It was as if she'd died, I thought. To never be able to contact her again—what would be the difference between that and death? That she would continue living, of course, breathing, cooking, walking, loving. But not with me.

I chucked the beetles out into the night. Then I shut the window.

16.

I spent three days in Bordeaux. I took a room in an old hotel with big keys, clunky in my pocket as I drifted around the city, avoiding Place de la Victoire, and Rue Saint-Catherine, letting the wind chew down my cigarettes, then holding onto the butts until I hit a trashcan, my fingertips by then stained, dark and yellow like sick bumblebees. My first afternoon I braved a chess café Alphonse used to go to. I won a couple games, lost a few, and for the next two days I walked by like a smear across its windows, half-hoping someone would come out and invite me in, half-hoping nobody would remember me, only to end up down the street, sitting by a fountain in the plaza. On my last night, I lay spreadeagle on my bed, watching the news, ready to rot there until my Paris-bound bus tomorrow afternoon, when my cellphone buzzed on my bed, buzzing as if trying to burrow into the mattress, as if below the fluff and the springs there was something worth recovering.

Where are you? Alphonse said, the wind humming from a cracked window on his side of the line. On my side, he couldn't hear a thing, even the news on mute, yet the cold French fries seemed to noisily ooze oil at the bottom of a to-go box on the corner of the bed. On the news, the president had escaped on a moped with his mistress, and the footage kept repeating itself, him wearing a black helmet, his mistress's hands wrapped around his stomach.

Ibis Budget Hotel, room 203, I said.

We'll be there in ten minutes, he said, and he said something to someone else, someone sitting with him in his Renault van, and I could even hear him step on it, as he began to speed towards Bordeaux.

About two hours later, I opened the door to Alphonse and his girlfriend. Alphonse winked at me and pulled out a full bottle of chartreuse from behind his back.

To celebrate your last night, he said. We pecked on the cheeks and he slyly introduced me to Charlotte. She wore loose jeans, the same long coat from the last time I'd seen her, and white heels. I said it was a pleasure to meet her. It was as if I'd seen her from different angles, the side of her face in Ciné Belgrand, the back of her as she walked with the poet, and now, finally, she was whole before me, her cheeks rubbed with vanilla beans, the scent so strong, as we pecked hello. My room was dim, and none of us made a move to turn on the lights. The air, I realized, must have smelled like me, like too many body cells, like the walls themselves were taking on my hair and skin.

Behind us, Alphonse was already pouring us three paper cups of chartreuse.

Just a little for me, my dove, Charlotte said, before turning to me. So why do they call you Tintin? You don't have any Belgian blood, do you?

No. It's my hair, I said.

That's not enough to make you Tintin, she said.

You can call me by another name, if you like, I said.

Your real name, please, she said.

Lay off, Charlotte, Alphonse said, from the bed. Charlotte narrowed her gaze on him, then looked back at me.

Is this a nonsmoking room? she said.

You can crack the window, I said. Alphonse took a sip, and closed his eyes for a moment. The chartreuse softening the edges of my paper cup, I watched Charlotte lean against the wall, her hand out the window. It was like a magic trick, how her hand disappeared, then reappeared with the cigarette at her lips.

I've heard quite a bit about you, Tintin, she said. It's a shame that you're leaving tomorrow. The conversation continued on politely. Charlotte kept smoking by the window, Alphonse lay in bed, and I sat in a chair. I told them about my Schwinn getting stolen.

I used to want to be a criminal, Charlotte said. She leveled her gaze on me. Alphonse pointed the remote control at the television and flipped through channels.

I could unlock doors with bobby pins, she said. I raised an eyebrow and waited for her to go on.

You can ask Alphonse. At the hotel in the Pyrenees, the doors were like these. I used to unlock his door whenever I wanted, Charlotte said, giggling.

It's true. It's her hidden talent, Alphonse said. From the cracked window, the typewriter click of rain began, and I felt suddenly adventurous.

Let's go out, I said.

In this weather? Alphonse said.

It's his last night, my dove.

That's true. And Tintin can leave the keys, and you can show him how you unlock those doors.

A beautiful idea, Charlotte said, as she looked around the room, at the stain on the wall under the ventilation, and back at me. I dropped the big key on the bed.

Are you sure you can open a door like this?

I'm sure, Charlotte said.

We marched out onto the wet streets, past the Renault van glistening on the corner. We set out on foot to a nightclub called Le Coq. Alphonse and Charlotte walked quickly, and I had to stretch my legs to keep up with them. Charlotte's heels shot in and out of view beneath her coat.

At Le Coq, I stood in the smoking room, and watched Charlotte and Alphonse dance through the glass. Fragments of people around me stuck out in the smoke the way they do in a Turkish bath. Charlotte and Alphonse looked happy, dancing in that club, as the burning tip of a cigarette inched its way to my fingers. Eventually Charlotte came in and pulled me out onto the dance floor, and all three of us danced. I hadn't checked my trench coat in, and there I was dancing wildly, as if I'd lost control of my limbs.

When we got back to the hotel, the hallway creaked like a thousand violins under us. We stood in front of the keyhole while Charlotte got her bobby pin. I was nervous, as if we were about to actually break into a room. She busied herself in front of the keyhole, while Alphonse and I leaned against the wall, and finally, my door clicked opened.

We stood in front of the bed. Charlotte went into the bathroom, and came out still wearing, to my relief, her jeans and shirt. Alphonse complained about the heat, even though it was just early spring, and slid off his pants. I went under the sheets, turned on my side, and tried to get to sleep as soon as possible. Alphonse got into bed on the other side, and Charlotte

in the middle. I didn't move. I could feel the definiteness of the edges of the bed, and if I moved an inch further away, I'd fall off.

I could hear both of them breathing. Charlotte's vanilla perfume hung above the bed, above both of us. I made sure there was at least an inch between us, and felt the friction there, and tried to stay away, as if I were on the very edge of an abyss. It was the closest I'd ever gotten to a Frenchwoman, and now, I wanted only miles between us, on that mattress.

Charlotte left early in the morning. She kissed Alphonse and then kissed me on the cheeks, and left. Alphonse and I had about eight hours to kill in Bordeaux, until my bus to Paris. He promised to stay with me until the end. After leaving my baggage in a locker at the train station, we went to a Steak and Frites place just across the plaza from the Place de la Victoire. The archway seemed to decay under the sun, its existential question gone unanswered. Just after we ordered, Alphonse fished out a folded-up envelope from the pocket inside his leather jacket.

I forgot to give you this last night, he said. I bumped into your landlord in Biscarrosse the other day.

I recognized my handwriting, the ballpoint, and its heavy black ink that spread from the tip when I poised it on the page, to end all those sentences.

How did you get your hands on this? I said, grabbing the letter.

Your landlord, I just told you, Alphonse said. The stamps were postmarked New York City, which meant the letter had been within a train ride to Ela, tumbled in the back of a post office. I was surprised by the letter's lightness, never read by Ela, invisible for six months,

somewhere between Ela and I, now fattening between my fingers, slowly taking on the weight of our failed correspondence.

Who is Ela? Alphonse said, wagging a cigarette between his lips as he leaned back to light up.

She's from New York, I said.

That's obvious, Alphonse said, giving me one of those looks he gave during chess games when I made a foolish move. I wanted to bring the letter to my nose, to know if it carried the scent of gingko pods crushed on sidewalks, but not in front of Alphonse. The only thing my nostrils could detect was the frying oil wafting from the French fries on my plate.

What did you write?

Nothing, I said.

Alphonse paused, and let out a puff, then said, I almost opened it, but then I realized how impossible it would be to read your chicken scratch. But I do have an English-French dictionary in the van.

Are you serious? I could feel my cheeks burning, and my stomach suddenly became a block of ice.

I'm just kidding, Tintin. I'm just curious. It's a thick letter, Alphonse said.

I wrote it a long time ago. It's not important anymore, I said.

Why not?

Because it's not true anymore. I would have to rewrite everything I wrote for any of it to be true, I said. Alphonse calmly cut his steak into symmetric pieces.

Tintin, I think you're one of those old guys at the chess park who keep on playing even after losing their queen in the first ten moves.

Why do you say that?

You're the only guy I know who writes letters, Alphonse said.

I couldn't blame him for thinking like this. The only time Alphonse had left the Bordeaux region, he'd come back, after only a few months in Paris. He didn't know what it was like to live too far away to drive his Renault van to see Charlotte. How many times had I had that vision of Ela opening this letter? Tearing it open, her chewed-up nails holding both sides of the pages, flipping one after another? To prove to her that I could be part of her life—I could arrive, I could clench my hand around a pen until my entire arm was numb, and that effort could reach her, even if I didn't.

A forkful of steak dropped to my stomach, and I felt full.

What about Consuelo? Alphonse said.

She's in Buenos Aires, I said.

Are you going to write her a letter?

I don't know, I said, even though I'd already begun to write long, Ela-like emails to her.

If you do, make sure you write the correct address, Alphonse said, chewing his steak in the corner of his mouth, his right cheek bulging.

I will, I said. We sat there, at that table, on the edge of the Place de la Victoire, for another hour or so, then went to the bus stop.

I slid the letter into my luggage, and as soon as I was out of sight, would jam it down the throat of a trashcan. I lamented the fact that we hadn't played chess, not since that last time, when I decided to stay in Biscarrosse until the end. And now I'd lost two women. Perhaps what I had to do was write another letter. That was the only way I could convince Ela of anything—but of what did I want to convince her? I wasn't even sure, not at that moment at least. Our last conversation had been nine minutes and nine seconds. I would've at least wanted to continue it. To explain things.

Alphonse helped me push my luggage into the bottom of the bus, and he stood back on the sidewalk. His black hair was combed back, and he had a quirky expression, the corners of his lips trembling. I gave him a hug, and he slapped me hard on the back. Then we kissed on the cheeks. The bristle of his five o'clock shadow against mine seemed to tangle together briefly, like straps of Velcro, before we pulled apart. He smelled like an old sweatshirt. I grabbed ahold of his neck with one hand, and said a few last words, then turned around, and climbed into the bus, which seemed to be waiting there like a giant organism, its tongue lapped out, waiting to swallow me up.

From its window, I looked down at him.

He also looked down, as if my gaze weighed his head down, his chin to his chest. As the bus motor rumbled, I could feel the entire Bordeaux region about to disappear. Along with all of the Sud-Ouest, I felt, along with all of this country, soon. The bus lurched from the curb, and I rapped the window with my knuckles, but Alphonse didn't look up. He just shook his head and covered his face with his hands.

I didn't expect him to cry. He began to walk fast, the length of his stride long, clipping up the sidewalk. I realized at once that Alphonse would miss me. In traffic, still in Bordeaux, the headlights shimmered off a construction sign, making it seem ringed in the fast flickers of a fire. I put my hand over my heart, and wondered why the beat was so normal. Why none of this seemed to grab hold of my heart and wring the feelings from it. It was as if ever since I'd left Biscarrosse, I could barely feel a thing. I'd left behind all of my foolish intentions, all of my desires, somewhere between the lake and the ocean.

Everything was travelling with me, in the trunk of the bus. Everything but the people I'd met. And it was better like that. It was best to leave behind everything at once, in one clean swoop. To Paris, I thought. To Paris one more time.

17.

Pretend I'm calling you again, one more time. This time on your cellphone. But let it ring. Let it ring and I'll leave you this message, about the airport traffic controllers on strike in Paris, and how I'm stuck on the runway. By the way the air hostesses at the end of the corridor talk out of the corner of their mouths, I know I have at least ten minutes.

Ten minutes to tell you as much as I can.

To start off, we're flying to Florence. I don't know where your grandmother was from. I know it's too late to ask. Too late for an answer, too, but that's why I'm calling, so I—not you— can give answers. Not about Paris. Even though at the Louvre, I stared at the sphinx statues, at that jagged flatness where their noses tumbled off centuries ago, and thought of you. The cruelest thing to happen to a man would be to forget a woman's nose, especially one that casts a shadow above her lips. Like yours. I would rather forget your hazel eyes, even your voice, and the rest of you, before your nose.

Maybe I can't help but think about you because my brain is working again in English. The first words that come to mind are in English, always, and I keep stuttering, as if my tongue wants to be back in New York. The other day, by the Seine, my mother said my voice had changed, but perhaps because she's never heard me speak so fluently in French. She's sitting next to me, already fast asleep after taking this little pill for anxiety.

Listen, the pilot is talking, mumbling something incoherently as if he doesn't want anyone to actually understand him, but that must mean I still have time.

I just want to tell you how it all ended. How I truly did walk away from you, that night, after our skype call. You know the piñata my roommate made? I didn't have any trash bags left. I had all those Languedoc bottles to bring to the recycling depot. I got down on my knees, in the kitchen, and stuffed that frilly star to the tips. Then I walked out the door. That was what you did, too, right? On opposite sides of the ocean, we walked out, and we left each other.

Darling, I want to say—darling, what a word, it sounds like a pearl earring laying on the street, waiting to be found—but I'll resist.

So there I was. Dogs were sleeping behind the short stone walls, and the clay shingles seemed to snore on the cottages, the whole darkness of Europe undisturbed. So of course I lit a cigarette, and let it dangle from my lip. Like Ryan Gosling, just like in the movies—he's the best cigarette dangler of our time, don't you think? I started walking up the middle of the street as quietly as possible. The bottles kept clinking against each other. Think of that: I was walking away from you on Avenue Dousse, you and only you, with a piñata full of Languedoc bottles. I sounded like a rusty suit of armor taking a midnight stroll.

Then a dog barked.

Of course. Then another, and another. And the shudders started whipping open, the neighbors hushing their Max, Jack, Jazz, and French people name their dogs after us, if you didn't know, and I just kept going. Those sidewalk-shitting-machines kept on yapping and I just went on. I needed to get to the seaplane museum. That's where the cottages ended. Where I would be out of earshot, or at least out of view, of all the ruckus I caused.

You should've seen the lake, Ela.

I mean, you should've seen the way it generated moonlight and flung it through the glass walls, making this glow around the seaplane wings. It was then I realized that this was how they looked at night, probably, when the pilots ran out of fuel, and the propellers stopped spinning. Did I ever tell you that Antoine Saint-Éxupéry used to fly from there? The French writer. He was one of the first airmail pilots to cross the Atlantic. Perhaps I should've entrusted my letter to him, you might think. Perhaps he could've rewritten the entire thing and made a story out of my ridiculous inability to tell you what I'm feeling. But he died, mysteriously—probably due to a Luftwaffe pilot—on a flight over the Mediterranean Sea. He'd come back during the second World War to fight the Germans. But, then again, maybe he never got struck down.

A fisherman found his silver bracelet miles away from his flight path, and then later, a diver found parts of his plane spread apart under the water, off the coast of Marseille. But who knows, there's a lot of theories out there. Maybe he was just as hauntingly beautiful as those seaplanes, drifting in the air, floating above earth for as long as he could, under the cold stars.

Okay, the hostesses are on the move. They're talking about shutting cellphones, and buckling up, and soon this is going to end, it will, but listen. They'll have to snatch this out of my hand. I need to finish this.

Behind me, I heard steps.

I turned around to a big, black dog. No collar on its neck. I got my hand under the top of the piñata, and grabbed a bottle. I was ready to defend myself, but the mutt just went on

standing there. When I turned around, it started to follow me, up the empty road, through the empty courtyard, and I could hear its pattering steps, scraping along the pavement.

Meanwhile, I couldn't help but wonder where you were going. In Brooklyn, the cars were covered in pollen, so yellow they all looked like taxis, didn't they? Did you stop in a café, darling? Why do I feel so awful, using that word, when I mean every bit of definition in it? Why can't I resist using that word? Were you wearing tennis shoes? Did you miss the bus? Did the air smell like salt, even though it never does, anywhere, in Brooklyn?

It smelled like salt in Biscarrosse.

I got to that recycling depot. Those three green tanks under the trees. I set down the piñata, and started dropping in the bottles into the hole, one by one. The mutt was still there, standing ten feet behind me. The bottles crashed in, against all the other empty bottles. Perhaps it scared the mutt, because when I turned around, it was gone. The mutt was gone, and no matter where I looked, I couldn't see it, and I was alone. I could feel all of Europe, again undisturbed, beyond me, like a haunted mansion, waiting for me.

We're about to leave now. I'm not afraid. I've never been afraid of liftoff. I never said goodbye to you in Brooklyn. The airport traffic controllers waved below. They weren't on strike. Saying goodbye would've made the voyage realer. If I'd seen you one last time, I might never have even left. All I ever wanted was to keep you who and where you were, and to come back. For us to stay suspended.

Let me tell you one last thing: I left the geraniums in the grass. I left them out there, even if they looked like they were crawling their way to the little stone path around my

apartment. I didn't pick them up, and I didn't bring them back up to my apartment. Their little red heads craning up to the dark sky.

Can you imagine a soundless engine over the Mediterranean Sea? I don't want to crash—that's not what I'm saying, but I do want that moment without gravity, that gliding in the dark, when you can't tell up from down. I've always hated landing, Ela. That's why I always shut my eyes when the wheel clunk out. It's hard to believe anything could soften the impact of flying out of the sky. I always think the bolts are going to shoot out of the wheels, that the bottom of the plane is going to burst into fire. I always have to bite down hard on my teeth, bracing for the moment we touch down.

I always think that once I arrive, everything will be ruined. Perhaps that was why I left Brooklyn ten months ago. Because I knew that—I knew it would ruin us, once I got to where I was going.

I've always wanted to leave with grace.

18.

Somewhere between Paris and Florence, our baggage disappeared. My mother blamed the air traffic controller strike, and every morning took an hour to call the airlines. All she had was a blouse and jeans, and me, a faded chess tournament shirt, and a pair of khakis. At the end of our days, we washed our one set of clothes in the sink of that Airbnb in Florence, while ambulance sirens rang out the windows. We tried to keep our spirits up, because we still had Vico Equense, and Rome, on my mother's itinerary, before we would finally fly back to New York. My mother was especially bothered about the luggage, but as for me, it came as a relief, to know that my luggage, and that letter, was stuck in some hidden fourth dimension of international flights.

At a cybercafé, I looked up how long it would take to get to Verona: two hours and change, but I didn't write to Giovanna. She was probably finishing her thesis, as she'd said in the few messages we exchanged since meeting in Paris. You can stay here, but I'll be too busy to see you, she'd said, in an English she probably translated over Google. Still, two hours away from Verona, I kept a look out for her, or for anyone who might resemble in the slightest a blood relative of Ela. I was in the country from which all her past generations came, all of her ghosts. This was the closest I would get to meeting her family.

In Florence, I marveled at the number of people that could fit on a single bicycle. Two, sometimes three, people clinging to the slender body, and only the bike spokes and wheels suggested they were piled on a bike, and not a wheelbarrow. Nights, I walked alone, along the streets. I tried to buy cigarettes from a vending machine, but it swallowed my bills. I thumbed

the button a few more times, more disappointed by my own disinterest than by the machine—I had built this addiction, and now, it seemed to be disappearing, bit by bit, and I no longer truly wanted a cigarette. I'd given my lighter to a homeless man on the metro in Paris, and realized, in that moment, that I would no longer need it, and that I couldn't even fall in love with cigarettes. I could feel myself becoming the man I had been all along, the man I'd been in New York, the man I'd tried to escape. When my mother spoke to me in French, I could feel myself wanting to respond in English, the easy vocabulary and seamlessness of my voice beckoning me like the song of evil mermaids.

The one thing that stuck with me after Florence was the Leonardo da Vinci museum. It was a depressingly small room, given all I'd heard about him over my life—da Vinci the renaissance man, da Vinci the artist, da Vinci who invented flight—but there was a hexagonal mirror room that I stood in for at least five minutes, looking at myself from every angle, much more effective than using my mother's vanity case, back when I was a boy. I used to flash it in the bathroom to get a view of the back of my head. The red hair sleeked down my neck never seemed to belong to me, as if in that little reflection, I were spying on someone else. But now, in that hexagonal mirror room, I could see all of me, from heel to greasy hair, and I was just one person, in khakis and a faded chess tournament shirt. This was how I looked to the rest of Italy. This was what my great-grandfather looked like. If there weren't other tourists, waiting for their turn, I could've stayed there for hours.

The last night in Florence, my mother tried out her Italian by making a reservation over the phone. The voice on the other end of the line said, Pronto, pronto, pronto? I watched my mother struggle to get a word out, and then hang up, visibly shaken by this encounter with

her inability to communicate. We went to a pizza place below our Airbnb, and again accidentally paid for water. Later, knowing it would be my final chance before our next stop—apparently we wouldn't have Wi-Fi in Vico Equense—I went to a cybercafé. It took me a few tries to remember my email password. In my inbox, I had an email from Consuelo. It was long, and I enjoyed scrolling down perhaps even more than reading about her return to Buenos Aires, where she'd shared all of her Gauloises with her friends, and partied until the sun went down in a park. She said she would call me in a few days, if my phone worked in Italy. I wrote back to her and then checked the prices for flights from New York to Buenos Aires. Absurd, ridiculous, and yet, I couldn't stop myself.

My mother wrote down eleven different departure times for Vico Equense, and still, we somehow missed our train. We ended up riding first class, the only tickets available, and at the little Airbnb cottage, we sat and looked at the hills across the inlet of the Mediterranean Sea. They looked like the humps of a furry green camel, asleep. Cars moved along its ridge. My mother sighed and said it was wonderful to finally be without distractions, without Wi-Fi. We went to the sea, where I watched her collect seashells. She bathed in the water and told me to come on in, but I stayed on the shore. I didn't want to step foot in the sea.

It was the same sea that Consuelo had bathed in, back in Marseille, in the middle of winter. I'd gone in with her and we'd shivered on the pebbly beach afterwards. I'd even thought about making love to her that morning, at 6 a.m., but there'd been a man in the distance, picking up trash along the shore.

I went on a run for the first time since those runs in the forest of Biscarrosse. I ran hard, into town, across a bridge, and I took a breather across the street from a café, leaning

against the wall, my chest rising and dipping against my t-shirt. In the café window, past my reflection, a server with a bowtie stacked a tray with a bottle of soda water and glasses. He was the pale blue of my chess tournament shirt, and the knight on the front was likewise stamped across his white shirt. I'd always thought I was a bit like a knight, out of all the pieces. Always cutting a corner at the last minute, I thought, as the server slewed out of my reflection, leaving just me to stare at. I looked away, to the limestone wall, where a word was written in black paint on the wall. I took a step backwards to examine the graffiti. Ela, it said, the A dragged out, down, almost to the bottom of the wall. I sat down against the wall, my head beside the graffiti. I closed my eyes and felt the breeze ride through my hair. I felt woozy, and I stayed there, without moving, for little while. When I opened my eyes, the tall thin server was stooped over me and asking something in Italian. I gave him a thumbs up, and he nodded his head, then went back across the street, his shirt puffy as if filled with air, like a kite.

We went to Pompeii. My mother loved that sunbaked sewer system, the brown chunk of a stove, as we walked through the rubble of the city. The leftovers of reddish walls rose to our hips, and it was hard for me to imagine that Pompeii had ever been a city at all, as other families wandered around us. We stopped in front of some statues modeled after the statues that once stood in Pompeii, and I felt immensely bored. It would be a lie, a filthy lie, to say that I thought about Brooklyn—Brooklyn after a volcano eruption, or better yet, Brooklyn after a tidal wave so high it blocked the sun. Perhaps if I had already known what would happen on all of my future visits to the city, I would've wished destruction on the borough. That chronic condition of expecting Ela to appear out of any shop, any café, any corner of any street, would dog me for years. Out of tens of millions of inhabitants, I would prepare

myself to bump into her, spinning entire conversations from an imaginary encounter. Or worse, that I would search for her online, and find a grey profile avatar of hers at a clinic website, and realize that I'd forgotten what she looked like. For years, whenever I would see someone who reminded me of her, that woman's face would superimpose hers, and it would happen so many times that she would have a thousand faces. And yet I would still be certain that in thirty years, if I were to bump into her, I would recognize her.

It would take a while to realize what I most loved about her was her absence. Or rather, the suspense before she filled it, before she became amazingly whole. Could a man love a woman's absence more than her presence? Was that love? For the longest time, we used to talk about taking a bath together. I imagined myself tapping a cigarette, and watching the ash, plump and intact, sink through the hot water, explode gently against the bottom. I could so fiercely imagine her there, with me, in the bath, watching the ash, that I could hear the water lap over the edge.

But imagination was never enough.

I could never make myself feel like anything but a tourist in Brooklyn, just like this destroyed city I was standing in, wearing the same dirty shirt, bewildered, disoriented, under the sun. Even if at that very moment, I'd have been in Brooklyn, and I'd somehow gotten the address of Ela's new apartment, I would've gotten lost on the subway. The map always looked like a Hydra, except instead of wherever a head was cut off, two or three new trainlines grew.

Perhaps the tidal wave was the best option. After all, I didn't know how to swim. The more water between Ela and me, the better, it seemed, for both of us. Of course, I didn't know how she was living our definite separation. I thought about writing her another letter, as I

stood there, holding a Pompeii pamphlet, sweat on my neck, as my mother asked another tourist to take a photo of us.

We're going to look like we spent one day in Italy, she said, rubbing my shirt between her fingers.

In Rome, we walked up and down the Via dei Fori Imperiali. Atop of the coliseum, a seagull perched, unaware of what its orange, webbed feet stood atop of, of all the blood spilt on the sands below. Later, at the Airbnb, I kept replaying that moment, as I thought about what I should type to Consuelo. All of this history under the feet of a seagull, and in one fell swoop, it could lift off, unweighted by time. That was what I most wanted: to move swiftly, and upwards, away from the wooden floorboards of this apartment in the Italian capital. Consuelo's icon turned green, and I messaged her to see if she wanted to skype.

My mother was in the next room, and surely, she would hear us speaking in French. Consuelo appeared on the screen, her dark hair and blue eyes emerging in a storm of pixels. I felt a desire to lean closely to the screen, but I resisted. I told her about the coliseum, and the Roman Forum, and those ruins, and I talked loudly. I clicked the volume button up, even, and took off my headphones, so my mother would hear Consuelo.

At the Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport, to stretch my legs, I wandered away from our gate. I found myself at the gate for a flight back to Paris, and then suddenly found myself sitting amongst French people, listening to the conversations, watching them watch their phones. But I wasn't going back to Paris. I stood up, and went back to the gate for New York City.

As we settled into our seats on the plane, my mother finally asked me who I was talking to the other night. I told her, proudly, and then said, as a sidenote, that Consuelo and I always spoke in French. On the plane, people spoke in Italian, or in English around us. The pilot murmured over the loudspeaker about our estimated time of arrival in New York City, and the current weather, sunny, seventy-two degrees, and that we should turn off our phones. And then, we slid upwards, and left Rome tilting sideways behind us. As we flew over the Mediterranean Sea, out my window, dark shapes floated over the water. For a moment, I thought it might be the silhouettes of humungous fish beneath the surface. I'd never seen shade from this height, spotting the surface of the world. I'd never seen the shape of clouds, and as the plane rose higher, into the maker of shadows, I remembered the letter. It was still in my luggage, lost somewhere between Paris and Florence. And it would be years before I began again.

Vita

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