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This Book Will Make You Look Thinner

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THIS BOOK WILL MAKE YOU LOOK THINNER

by

BETHANY PROSSED

B.A., B.S., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2010

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:
This Book Will Make You Look Thinner
written by Bethany Prosseda
has been approved for the Department of English

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(Marcia Douglas)

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(David Glimp)

Date________________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This collection of short stories engages iconic brands in order to explore the space between consumer and product, individual and collective. By deploying both digressive logics as well as the rhetoric of advertising—which is used by, and is particular to each brand in question—this collection seeks to ask: what are advertisements really selling us? In these stories, the answer is caught up in the formations and complexities of consumer identity within the capitalistic landscape of 21st century America. The characters in this collection desire to feel like they belong, which for them means receiving acceptance from the collective. In their journey to belonging, the characters struggle to forget popular culture and the teachings of capitalism—which has them all convinced they can buy an identity of belonging—when they find themselves in absurd and surreal situations where those artifacts no longer apply.
“All the people are dancing and they’re havin’ such fun / I wish it could happen to me.” —The Velvet Underground
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Vanessa and I sit on our knees in her living room. She lights a slim cigarette that hangs from her mouth then waves out a match. “Well? Are you going to show me or what,” she says. She purses her rouged mouth to the side and exhales a hard line of smoke, which snakes its way up towards the popcorn ceiling.

“I’m going to show you,” I say to Vanessa, “look here.” I open up the brown paper bag I’ve been holding and dump its contents on the carpeted floor. We spread the white, framed squares out in front of us. “I found these slides up in my grandmother’s attic when we were cleaning it out,” I tell her. Vanessa ashes her cigarette, picks up a slide, and studies it in silence.

Vanessa’s a photographer. She’s always talking about how she wants to move to New York to do fashion photography. New York is where fashion lives, Vanessa says. In New York, everyone is fashionable, even the grade school teachers, even the custodians.

I’m not sure whether or not what Vanessa says is true because I’ve never been to New York. I’d like to go someday. I’ll go someday and when I do, it won’t be to see the Empire State Building or the Macy’s Day Parade or anything like that. I don’t need to see those things. I’ve seen the pictures. I can imagine. I’ve seen velvet ropes, long lines, and sweaty tourists before. I can imagine elevators and elbows. I can imagine heavy breathing. I’ve seen the pictures, the tall bars at the top of the building. I’ve seen the man dressed as King Kong. I’ve felt the wind in my hair and the wind in my mouth: my hair in my mouth. I’ve tasted brown nests of my own hair. I’ve tasted the black nests of other’s, how they crawl and catch on the tongue. I’ve gagged above a minute city where the people pulsed like ants. I’ve heaved up oceans with my eyes and blurred the skyline. I’ve seen the horizon, how it beats like hummingbirds around the edges. There, I saw that one of us was blinking.
I didn’t want to see this thing.

I need to see the filtered light of late afternoon leak through Fifth Avenue. I need to see it tear through long shadows and break. Buckling against sharp skyscrapers, the light refracts a thousand grainy shades of blue. I want to see the heavy bags of trash encased in snow yield to the careful touch of a garbage man. His pale hands send bags full of old underwear and melted Slurpees into the air with ease. His utterly unblemished Hermes scarf billows around his neck like a dream. I want to see the postal workers clad in their blue Emilio Pucci numbers. Bearing large boxes containing tiger cubs or precious jewels, I want to see them ascend the grand staircases of Manhattan’s elite in the most slender stilettos. I need to touch the garbage man’s neck and feel the quivering silk. I need to confirm the existence of this impossibly staged city, too beautiful to be true.

Because where we live, no one is fashionable. Well, no one besides Vanessa is fashionable. No one is fashionable where we live because of the corn, the sheer amount of it. We have fields of corn, cribs of corn, and silos of corn. We have cornbread, corncake, cornstarch, and high-fructose corn syrup. We sell corncob pipes in every gas station. Our gasoline is made from corn and our liquor is too. It’s been reported that a large percentage of the state’s native population swears that when they look at Iowa on a map, all they can see is a halved cob of slightly gnawed corn.

The corn is problematic.

Every week, people get lost in the corn. This happens all the time: a woman gets in her car to go buy some jeans. Wranglers or Riders? she thinks, making her way down the road. What jeans was I wearing when Mark told me my butt looked good? Then, all of the sudden, she’s plowing through a cornfield in her minivan instead of pulling into the Walmart parking lot. It happens just like that. Seriously. You’ll be driving a school bus or walking the dog one minute, and then you’re not walking the dog at all anymore. You’re lost in the corn, and the dog may or may not be lost with you.

Nearby objects sometimes wind up with you in the corn when you teleport.
No one really knows if what we do can even be called teleportation, but we call it that for lack of a better term.

We’ve asked, but no one can really tell us why we end up in the corn with the dog sometimes, but not others. “We would like the dog to come with us always,” we’ve told them. “The dog is a very happy dog, and the corn is very somber corn.” We’ve asked them for this many times, and many times they’ve tried, but no one can figure out how to make the dog apparate consistently.

People who aren’t from here trivialize the phenomenon by calling it drunk driving. This is easy to do because it’s the natives and locals who are the ones most often affected by teleportation. However, it’s not completely unheard of for a tourist to turn up in the occasional silo. When a tourist turns up in a silo, we usually hear about it. If it involves the police or fire department, we’ll hear about it in the Des Moines Register. They love that stuff. The police or fire department usually get involved when a tourist turns up in the corn because when you’re not from around here, you don’t know how to dress. You don’t know to wear jeans, and when you don’t wear jeans, they have to cut you out of your clothes. The corn makes jeans essential. A field of corn is impossible to navigate in anything other than boots and overalls. Cornhusks snag fine silk, so no one in Iowa bothers wearing it at all.

In an attempt to restore the nation’s faith in our sobriety, researchers at the University of Iowa are currently working to prove that the inability to see the state of Iowa as being anything other than a cob of corn is directly correlated to the frequency at which people find themselves lost. It would, after all, be difficult to effectively navigate the curves of I-80 when those curves resemble rows of buttered corn. However, we know this isn’t true because we’re quite good at reading maps.

All we really know is that the corn calls us to it. We go where the corn tells us.
It’s because of the corn that no one is fashionable. Because there are no fashionable people for Vanessa to photograph, she photographs other people’s engagements, weddings, and babies. She dresses them as ladybugs or bumblebees. The babies, that is.

We consider the slides in silence. They are small and framed by white cardboard. At their center sits a similarly small picture. In order to get a good look at the picture, it must be held up to a light or bright window.

Vanessa stands before a window, considering a slide. “These slides are all pretty old,” she says. “This one says it was taken in 1963. Come look at it.”

I look over her shoulder at the slide. It contains a picture of several people sitting at a picnic table in front of a white house. All the people in the picture look like they’re related. It’s because of their relation to one another that I assume they’re attending a family reunion. The detail that some of the people are very old, and some of them are middle-aged, and some of the very old people are holding very young children further reinforces my assumption. In the foreground, there’s a golden retriever playing fetch.

“It’s strange to look at these photos and think that some of these people are probably dead by now,” Vanessa continues. “The dog’s definitely dead.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” I say. And I hadn’t thought of it. I hadn’t thought of it because the world I’d been peering into felt vibrant and immediate in that particular way that all things from the sixties feel. When I’d been looking at the picture, I hadn’t been looking at it. I had been in it. I’d been sitting there at the picnic table with corn stuck between my teeth and the July wind tussling my hair.

“Are these people dead? Do you know them?” Vanessa asks.

“No, I don’t know them. I don’t even know the person who took the photos. A friend of my aunt or something.”
When Vanessa’s not taking pictures of weddings or babies, she takes pictures of things she likes. Vanessa likes the corn. She likes the fields, the silos. Vanessa likes anything from the sixties and some things from the seventies. Vanessa likes the photographs of Francesca Woodman.

Francesca Woodman lived during the seventies. Vanessa says she models her photographs after those taken by Woodman. Woodman's photographs, or at least the ones I've seen, are taken in black and white. I like Woodman’s photographs. In my favorite of her photographs, a woman is seen standing between two windows in a crumbling room. The woman is naked. Or rather, she would be naked if there wasn’t a piece of wallpaper covering her face and breasts and another, which she holds in her left hand, covering her lower half. Only the woman’s navel, arms, and feet are naked.

Sometimes, when I look at it, I think the woman in the picture is Vanessa. Other times, I see only a field of corn.

Not all of Vanessa’s photographs resemble Woodman’s, and these photographs displease her. She often buries or throws them away. On occasion, she gives them to me. Before I’m allowed these photographs, however, I must first swear that I’ll never show them to anyone. Not even if I die, says Vanessa. Not even if you die, I say. So, I keep these photographs in dusty shoeboxes, tucked beneath the darkness of my bed, and do not show them to anyone. There are also other photographs, the ones that please Vanessa. She puts these photographs on Instagram where they’re shown to everyone. I want to be immortalized, says Vanessa when I ask her why she buries some photos but shares others.

On Instagram, Vanessa is not “Vanessa.” She’s shad_0_graph. Many people like shad_0_graph’s photographs on Instagram, so shad_0_graph has many followers. Vanessa doesn’t know these followers. They are not her friends. They don’t know her. They only know shad_0_graph, which is to say they know what they see. What they see is someone who looks to
them like 1977 or a crystalline structure. She is honeysuckle and they are hummingbirds. She is wrapped in chicken wire, and they cannot reach her.

Vanessa and I continue to look through the slides. We’ve been sitting so long that the carpet has carved red grooves in the palms of my hands. The grooves are tilled rows ready for seed. I imagine carpet sprouting across my palms and between my fingers.

Vanessa sets down the slide she’s been holding. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“It’s something I haven’t told anyone.”

“Ok. You know I won’t tell.”

“I know you won’t. I just want to be clear. Before I moved here and before you knew me, I used to strip.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Vanessa says, lighting another cigarette. “Where I worked, there was a man who used to come just to see me. After awhile, we became friends. He was a photographer, and one night he asked me to pose nude for him. He said he’d never taken nude photos before. He found me attractive. I was thinner then. I told him no. He told me I was chicken. I told him I wasn’t. He dared me. I did it. When will I ever be this young and look this good again, I remember thinking. I wanted proof. So, we went to his flat, and he took the pictures.” A plume of cigarette smoke surrounds Vanessa.

“I still have the photos. I’ve never showed them to anyone. Do you want to see them?”

I say yes, and she shows them to me. The photographs are in black and white. They are the most beautiful photos I have ever seen. In the photos, Vanessa doesn’t look like the Vanessa sitting before me who’s wearing a fur coat and whose lips are rouged. Her eyes are darker and her skin is pale. Her hair isn’t black like it is now, but blonde. She’s so much thinner in the photo that I can’t be
sure it’s even Vanessa. It’s not Vanessa. At least, not the Vanessa I know. I want to ask if the woman in the photo is shad_0_graph, but I don’t. I already know that it is.

“Was this the moment you were curated?” I ask her.

“What?”

“Was this—” I say, pointing at the photo, but my voice pales midsentence. The corn is calling, drowning me out.

In the photo, Vanessa’s hair is so blonde. I can see every strand. She seems close to me, so I reach out to touch her hair. It’s soft. It’s tassels of corn. The tassels are so great in number that I must part them like a curtain. I part them and begin to walk. I can’t see. I breathe in tassels. They’re in my nose and down my throat. I feel blonde fibers nesting on my tongue. I feel cool air, and then I can see.

I can see before me a great field of corn.

Sticking out my tongue, I scrape the fibers with my fingers and wipe them on my jeans. In the moon’s hot light, I see nothing but corn. I begin to walk. I break stalks with my palms to mark my way. Deep down though, I know there’s no going back. I walk for days, but the sun never rises. When I finally reach the edge of the clearing, I bow the corn and see the city. I see a window. I see New York. I see that I’m in a flat.

I’m in the flat.

Seeing that I am where I am, I wonder if I should hide. I wonder if I’m something they can see: shad_0_graph and the man. The man looks right at me before I can decide what to do. He looks and stares right through me. It’s clear that he sees only the city skyline and the massive windows of his flat.

“How does it look?” shad_0_graph asks him.

He looks at the camera display. “It looks like shit. Put on more lipstick.”
“What?”

“I said it looks like shit. Here,” he throws the rouge at her. He dims the lights and takes several more photos. The bulbs crack overhead like thunder or lightning.

“There it is,” he finally says, a lifetime later. “There it is.”

I look over his shoulder at the camera’s display. I look at Vanessa. The two look nothing alike.

“It’s beautiful,” shad_0_graph says. The man begins to say something, but I can’t hear him. The corn is calling me. I can hear it.

I go to the window.

I go where the corn tells me. I break the window, or I don’t. I go through the window, and I am falling. I’ve seen the pictures, so I know what falling looks like. If I can imagine elevators, I can know what falling is.

It’s so quiet above the city that I think I surely must be still. Still, not falling. There’s no whistling in my ears, no breeze on my face. I am pulsing like a hummingbird. I am blinking like a star, forever above the corn.
Now I’m not certain about this detail but seem to remember reading in Reader’s Digest that it’s never a good idea to leave home in your sweatpants.

It seems I must’ve read this in the Digest, as it’s the only literature I can bear anymore. See, life is complicated and the Digest is not. The Digest is honest and unafraid to tell me that I have unrealistic expectations. It’s unabashed to offer me constructive criticism regarding my flaws in terms I can understand. The Digest knows how to comfort me. It says it’s common for people to have unrealistic expectations. It tells me that people with unrealistic expectations often find themselves lacking in friends. This is normal. To experience such a lack is normal for such people. Knowing this fact should allow such people to feel less alone. However, should such a lonely person ever desire a friend, she need only lower her expectations. Such a person who desires such a friend will find it helpful to think of her expectations as a sea of ugly homes in need of a good leveling.

Such advice, if followed, makes life a little less complicated.

Standing before my front door in faux shearling slippers and my saddest pair of college sweats, I recall this advice and say aloud, “It is never a good idea to leave home in your sweatpants.” When I say this, I note how the gesture bears some resemblance to an effort. An effort to make my life better or, at the very least, a little less complicated. Yet, I’m unmoved.

My apathy alarms me. Could it be possible that I, at 25, was letting myself go? Could it be that somewhere along the way I’d unknowingly set myself on the path that leads women to the unapologetic wearing of leopard and various other animal prints, especially favoring those in the hot pink variety? The path that leads to bleached blonde hair with grown out roots, to waddling down
the aisles of local Wal-Marts in search of a good deal, and to producing a litter of offspring that bears an eerie resemblance Honey Boo Boo?

Making a concerted effort this time, I close my eyes with such resolve they quiver. I say it once more; “It is never a good idea to leave home in your sweatpants.” I give it pause.

—

Somewhere within this pause, the grubby weight of the imagined children, which cling to my leopard hem and whimper for chocolate, as they drag and skitter behind me down the aisles, fades when they, in unison, release their grip to rub their snotty noses. I quickly round the corner. I pass an end cap of celebrity gossip magazines. “Heid Klum this,” and “Heidi Klum that,” I read, zipping by. Behind me, my hot pink, leopard print robe glides effortlessly and makes that faint whipping sound that only synthetic fibers can produce. I step into the light and disappear. It’s blinding, this light. I find myself no longer able to recall the grubby weight of the decision at hand.

—

Though I forget, I somehow remember Heidi Klum. I conclude that if there were no paparazzi, Heidi Klum would probably not—no, most definitely she wouldn’t—put on pants and heels to make a quick Sunday morning trip to the store for eggs.

I make for the door. I reach for the knob. “It is never a good idea to leave home in your sweatpants,” I say again, this time nearly shouting.

I head to the store anyways, despite the good advice.

—

What I somehow fail to realize within this pause, however, is that in the real world there are paparazzi, and in the real world I’m not Heidi Klum.
Now that I’m standing humble beneath the halogen lights of the checkout, I have no doubt that the lines of my face are illuminated in such a way that they come to resemble a map of the world’s rivers and tributaries or worse: canyons.

The truth of these facts proves nearly unbearable.

Here, I’ll explain.

I once had a man. This man had a name, and that name was Donald. I called him Darling. But seeing as he’s not dead—not even to me—I should make an addendum and say that his name is Donald.

Here, I’ll explain.

I am homely. I am small, one nondescript pebble amongst a sea of pebbles. I know this to be true, so please don’t try to say otherwise. Yes, I am all these things, but above all I am lonely.

Here, I’ll break it down.

She was more beautiful. No, I don’t know her name, but a thing doesn’t need a name in order for it to be real—very real—or stand before you, holding hands with Donald in the checkout line, does it?

I pick up a Reader’s Digest to shield my face with. I’m hoping he hasn’t seen me. I’m sure that he has. I know that he has when he says, “Hello, Joanna. How’ve you been?”

I’m nervous and look around in search of some small comfort. It’s at this moment I note the sweatpants. My God. A sea of sweatpants! Sweatpants on moms. Sweatpants on teens. Sweatpants on the young and the old. The thick and the thin. Sweatpants without words. Sweatpants with words that boast their wearers are “Juicy.” Hell, even the men are wearing sweatpants. This is normal. To be wearing sweatpants is to be normal.

But the normality of the sweatpants doesn’t comfort me, no. I note then that she and Donald are wearing sweatpants, but even this does not comfort me. In fact, it does anything but
comfort me because I recognize the sweatpants she is wearing. I know those sweatpants. I know that they belong to him.

This belonging makes me nervous, as I belong to no one.

At last, I say something stupid. “I’ve been considering getting a pet,” I say. “That’s how I’ve been.” Here, I manage a constricted smile. Here, it goes without saying that I immediately regret having said such a stupid thing. However, I console myself with the thought that I’ve said this stupid thing because I’m nervous. It’s human to be nervous, the Digest tells me. This is normal. To be nervous is to be normal. The Digest says that people, when nervous, are inclined to say many more stupid things than they would otherwise. This is a fact. This has been proven by scientists in Russia, or was it Iceland? No matter. It’s been proven by scientists somewhere. It’s just too bad for me that my state of otherwise is already plagued by the saying of stupid things at a frequency that qualifies as being well above average.

“Oh, really,” Donald says in a manner that suggests I should continue to embarrass myself by divulging more of my stupid thing.

I try to give it pause, but I’m forced to divulge more of my stupid thing when that pause refuses to be broken and grows cold and unbearable.

I make an effort. I say, “Well, yes. You know I’ve never owned a pet, and it just seems about time that I should.” I don’t mention here that I’m lonely. “You know,” I say, “I’ve been reading a lot about the health benefits of owning pets lately. It’s said that in addition to being good companions, pets also have the capacity to lower their owner’s blood pressure, just by petting them. Isn’t that amazing?”

Then, another long pause.

“So, there’s that.”
I’m failing miserably and think to shift the focus of the conversation away from me by asking him about his life—that is, his life since me—but before I can do so, the unexpected happens.

She asks me—in what seems to be a genuine gesture that’s empathetic towards my inability to say the right thing, or even one normal thing—“What sort of pet are you thinking about getting?”

I’m caught off guard and don’t know which way to feel anymore. How should you feel when something breaks away from a rigid structure? Something about the feeling of this moment causes a story I once read in the touching parts of the Digest to surface.

In this story, there is a man.

In this story, there is also a dog.

The story goes: one day, the man is walking his dog.

One day, the man is walking his dog, and everything’s normal. To be walking your dog is to be normal. The man’s walking his dog, and everything’s disturbingly normal. That is, everything’s normal until a pothole appears, out of the blue, and the man falls into it. Though the man falls into it, the dog somehow does not. Don’t ask me why things happen to some people and not others. Anyways, upon falling into this abnormal pothole, the man breaks both his legs. While the man’s in this pothole, the dog stays above and refuses to leave his owner’s side. Though the man cries out for help, he’s in a rural area, and there’s no one in sight. Finally, the man says to his dog, “Home.” The dog drags him out using his leash, and the man then wraps his arms around the animal’s neck. In the end, the dog drags him all the way home where he’s able to call the medics for help.

It was while reading this story that I realized how alone I was. Upon having this realization, I began to watch informational videos on YouTube demonstrating how to successfully perform the Heimlich on oneself. I also ceased to consume foods upon which I might choke.
It was then that I first considered getting a pet. I thought I’d ought to get a dog, if only in the interest of my own self-preservation, because if I happened to fall into a pothole and break both of my legs with no one to help in sight, I would most certainly die.

However, what concerns me more than my eminent death is the abnormality and alleged enormity of the pothole in this story. That one could fall into such a pothole is utterly terrifying.

—

“A yellow lab,” I tell her, and telling her this feels like crumbling or giving way.

—

Suppose that the man didn’t fall but the pothole expanded, crumbling in at the corners, caving at the weakest points of its foundation. Suppose the pothole was one possessed by greed. Suppose the pothole consumed the length of an entire city. Suppose that, at the moment the pothole began to consume the city, the people would all be sitting around their dinner tables, distant from one another and their meals. Suppose that the people would be sitting, and I would be microwaving a TV dinner in my little, yellow kitchen.

Out of the blue, the water, wine, or milk in our glasses would begin to ripple, as though other liquids were falling into it from somewhere above. For a moment, we would all stare dumfounded. Some of us would struggle to remember if we had taken our medications earlier that day. As bits of the ceiling would begin to pepper our meals, some of us would regret not having gone to church in a long time. Then, the city would groan and begin to fold slowly in on itself like a sad accordion. Parents would tell their children to stand in doorways. They would shield their children with their bodies. Lovers would cling to one another and the corners of their mattresses. Soon, the city would be a jumble. Parks would be on top of prisons and strip bars next to preschools. Some maniacal bum would start laughing, glad to no longer be alone in his misery. As
the walls and roads and trees and stripper poles would come dangerously close to cracking open our eggshell skulls, the collapse would stop.

For a moment, we would all remain wide-eyed with mouths agape in disbelief. We would be waiting for our souls to collectively float up from our bodies and towards the unknown like the pink, spun sugar of one thousand cotton candies.

Then, when it was certain that the end had not and would not come, the people would rejoice. The mothers and fathers would set their children on their backs and would climb up from the wreckage. The lovers would walk hand in hand out of their tilted homes. The pet owners would say to their animals, “Land,” and the cats, dogs, parakeets, and gerbils would drag them up to safety and lick the tears off their faces.

Those of us without loved ones, or lovers, or pets would debate whether or not it was worthwhile to make the climb up to steady grounds.

Above us, we would hear the happy people holding one another.

I wouldn’t be able to help but note that she and Donald would be among the happy people above. I would note that all the happy people would be wearing sweatpants. Heidi Klum would be there, and she’d be wearing sweatpants.

We’d all be wearing sweatpants.

All of us would be wearing sweatpants, and I’d still be sitting in the wreckage below, debating whether or not it would be worthwhile to make the climb.

Then, just before the moment where I’d decide it wasn’t worth it, she’d extend to me her nameless hand. After a long pause, I would take it. I would take it and climb up the mountain of Reader's Digests that had poured forth from my apartment and had piled at my doorstep at the moment when the city had begun to fold.

I would take her hand and begin my ascent up, from the wreckage.
At Wells Fargo, I’m furiously filling out a deposit slip on a faux granite table. The table features a calculator that is glued to its surface and two pens, which are also attached to fixed points of the table’s surface by ball chains. The ball chains are far too short when considered in comparison to the table’s surface area, and in order to use the pen with any success, I must stoop at an awkward and unflattering angle, which I can only imagine is very poor for my spine. The pen tugs at the chain with every downward stroke, making my handwriting nearly illegible, as I race to be the first of the other surrounding men and women to complete my slip. I succeed in this task and announce my victory by throwing down my pen with such force that it rolls off the edge of the table before being caught and left swaying by its chain.

It’s noon on a Friday, which means that the lines in Whole Foods, post offices, and banks across America resemble those at Disney World during the summer months. However, at the end of a line in Disney World there is a ride, whereas at the end of the line in a Wells Fargo on a busy day there is a disgruntled teller who is underpaid, overworked, and everyday considers quitting his job and everyday tells himself he should. And he would. And he would if it weren’t for the mortgage. And the groceries. And the braces.

I approach the line and lift my head—which I’d been keeping down in an effort to beat out the other customers—for the first time since arriving on the bank’s premises. A long, black chain snakes before me. The chain circles the lobby at least three or four times. I notice the line’s structure and can see no end. If there were a visual definition of purgatory, this line would surely be it. The line’s structure draws my eye to the lobby’s construction, which I consider and classify—based on its employment of geometric shapes, bright colors, and linear, decorative look—as Art Deco. Two televisions at each side of the lobby are on. I decide that the televisions must be new and have been
installed in anticipation of such wait times because I can’t remember having seen them during any of my previous visits to the bank. The television on the left side of the lobby is playing the Masters while Food Network’s Paula Dean is carving a spectacular centerpiece out of butter on the right. Both shows are muted. Everyone in the lobby is watching one or the other television. I notice that all of the women are watching Paula Dean, who is now devouring an entire cup of sugar in what I can only assume is—in lieu of the media’s wide coverage of her recently announced health condition that’s spurred debates about the ethos of her cooking—an effort to prove that her recipes are not detrimental to diabetics. And all of the men are facing to the left, watching the Masters. The decision of what television to watch should be easy enough, but it isn’t. And it isn’t easy because of Derrida and différance. Because acknowledging either television would render me part of the crowd.

And when I think of Derrida, I think of you.

And when I think of you, I think of memories, of the past. And conceptually, those things aren’t easy to work with because they lack structure. They’re water in my hands.

—

And I’ve been thinking of you lately, for some reason. And although I’ve tried to think of the reason why I might be thinking of you with such frequency, it has been, and continues to remain, unknown to me. Maybe I saw that look you used to have when you laughed in the eyes of the man who bags groceries at Safeway. Or maybe I caught your cologne in the air when a stranger passed me by on the streets.

Or maybe what I’ve been thinking about is myself.

After all, I can’t deny that I’m getting older or that my future is waning. I can’t deny that with every passing day it becomes more and more likely that I’ll be alone in old age. I haven’t been thinking these things consciously, but I know that they’re there, little gears in my unconscious mind. I know that their occasional turning can’t be helped. I can’t deny that I’ve found it hard to sleep at
night; I lie awake wondering if I’ve made the right choices. If I’ve spent my time well. If I’m spending my time well.

Because I’ve spent so much of my time building sturdy cathedrals with flying buttresses crafted after the finest examples of Gothic architecture: the Reims Cathedral, the Batalha Monastery, the list goes on. But no matter how I draft and redraft the blueprints, no matter how thick I make the doors, no structure I erect can ever be impervious to a draft. A slight breeze. And as though blown to me like torn pages in a gust, I find myself recalling the long, tree-lined road up to your house, your blue bedroom, and your books—those ones you’d made into hiding places—that lined the walls. How the hot air balloon crash-landed in your backyard on a cloudless day. How one time, in your front yard during winter, you called for your dog to come. The dog was a golden retriever. Gretta, I think she was called. Is that right? At any rate, the dog came to your call, bounding through the snow filled meadow and over the fence that circled your house. And just like that, the dog landed dead at your feet.

And sometimes I think that’s why you were afraid to call out to me. You were afraid that if you drew me too near, too close, we’d discover there was a barrier that stood between us. Something unseen and beyond our control. So you did not call out to me. No, you did not call and now the barrier between us is much larger than the clean-cut ending of glass. And somehow, this distance feels much larger than any death could ever be.

It was on Christmas six years ago that I last saw you. Christmas was your favorite. If I could ask you to recall one memory, I’d ask you if you remembered waiting in your car for the train to cross through town. We had bought a bottle of André Brut because we were feeling sophisticated. We forgot to bring glasses so we took turns sharing the bottle. We waited like that in the back of your car because we had wanted to see the trains go by all lit up and looking like Christmas. We had wanted to see if seeing the trains go by could make Christmas feel like it did when we were kids.
And it did.

And that’s the last time I can remember having ever felt like that.

I got a Snuggie this year for Christmas. This is something I would tell you if it were possible to fell all the years between us. If, in telling you this, you didn’t know what a Snuggie was, I would explain to you that it’s a blanket with sleeves, and it’s worn like a backwards robe. Knowing you would ask me what the selling point of a Snuggie is, I would tell you that Snuggies are far superior to blankets because you have full use of your arms, which allows tasks such as answering a telephone, petting your dog, or holding your newborn child close to your heart easy. In short, Snuggies allow the wearer to reach out, which in effect allows him or her to be closer to other people or objects.

And while I should note that there are only differences between ball chains, cathedrals, and Snuggies, I find I cannot, as I find none.

I find none because a Snuggie is not a part of you. Whether or not something is a part of you can easily be determined by asking if you would feel compelled to remove it before engaging in sexual intercourse; whether or not you would choose to do so is irrelevant to the question. And, to answer the question at hand, you would feel compelled to remove the Snuggie. But my point is that a Snuggie, cathedral, or ball chain affixed to a pen are all designed so that everything stays put. A Snuggie keeps your body heat in and the cold out. The things that a cathedral keeps in and out are more abstract; in one example, a cathedral keeps within itself a rigid structure but keeps out the things that might threaten that structure. A pen affixed to a stationary point by a ball chain keeps itself within a bank and keeps out the possibility of having itself taken. Or too much of itself taken: this last statement is a question.

—

“These things are ridiculous,” the man standing in front of me says.
I'm always suspicious when a stranger strikes up conversation with me. What is it that they teach the kids these days? Stranger Danger? I'm always suspicious because of the Stranger Danger, but this man looks nice enough. He looks like he could be someone's father. And besides, we're in a bank.

“What?”

“These Snuggie things.” He points to a television. I don’t mean to, but I look.

I feel you kick me.

“Damn.” And with that, all structure is lost.

—

I think I had always suspected it, but now I know that the structures I erected to keep you out prevented me from seeing that I have been, and will always be, wearing you on my back like a Snuggie. You are a part of me.

But it’s not just you who I carry, with your arms wrapped around my neck and your feet around my waist. I carry my mother, father, sister, grandmothers and grandfathers. I carry my friends and lovers. I’ve always been carrying them.

I wanted to believe that I could remove any or all of these people and their histories whenever I saw fit, but they’re as much a part of me as you.

I’ve been carrying them.

I’ve been carrying you, but I’ve kept myself guarded, never allowing anyone I’ve been carrying to reach out with his own hands.

—

“What?” says the man in line.

“Sorry. It’s not you. It’s just that. I was just trying to not look at the TV.”

“Why’s that?”
“It doesn’t really matter anymore.”

“Okay.”

“So, Snuggies. They look totally ridiculous, and the commercials are bizarre, but they’re actually really wonderful.”

“Better than a blanket?”

“Way better than a blanket. You don’t have to hold it up or anything like you do a blanket, so you can make an omelet or scrub the sink and still be warm.”

The man laughs. “I’m sold, but how do I convince my wife to let me wear it?”

“You could tell her that you’ll never wear it in public, but then you’d be lying.”

—

And where I once saw only the black chain in the lobby, I can now see the people. Like me, they are also wearing their loved ones like Snuggies on their backs. The loved ones hook their feet around the waist of their wearers. The loved ones wear other loved ones on their backs. The loved ones all extend their hands.

And I can see that some of the hands are locked around necks in a gesture of insulation and protection.

And I can see that some of the hands are reaching out.

And I can see that some of the hands are not just reaching out, but are touching.

And I know that you will never call out to me, but because you do not and will never do so does not mean that I can’t force your hand and let it reach out, so that it might find another ready to return its grip.

I force your hand.

And as your hand finds the grip of a hand worn by the man in front of me, it suddenly becomes easy for me to turn to the right with all the others who are watching Paula Dean on the
Food Network. Suddenly, it all becomes easy because for a very long time now, I've let myself live inside my cathedral. I built it with flying buttresses. I built it with moats and drawbridges. I built it after the finest examples of Gothic architecture. And inside, I've kept my pens on ball chains, my calculators affixed to their tables. And inside, I wore you like armor before a vast and empty table whose seats I thought would never be filled because of some quality I possessed or lacked. But now I can see that all this time I needed only to empty the moats and let down the drawbridge.
In my grandmother’s kitchen, my sister and I sit at the teal-legged table and check our phones. We got the phones in October, just after our grandfather died. The phones are shiny and have been praised as being the very latest in technology. They even come equipped with a robot-secretary. Or is it android-secretary? Robot. Android. I’ll say android-secretary because it feels more politically correct. At any rate, I call my android-secretary “Siri” because that is her name. Siri is complex and has many functions, which include the abilities to remind her owner of things he would otherwise forget and to look up facts he never knew.

It’s summer now, and my grandmother’s kitchen is hot, humid. My father, who is patching cracks in the walls upstairs, is accustomed to the humidity. My father is built from dogwood and cheesesteak. The weather makes stories of his time spent in this house rise from him in the way that clouds do from smokestacks, billowing and hot. At night, we can see the smokestacks from our bedroom window. We can see that the clouds are made of fire. It’s never dark at night here, not really. Instead, the sky is purple and grows orange at the place where it touches the horizon.

My sister and I are not made for such weather. We are built from arrowheads and sage.

I set my phone down on the table and stand up. “I never get any texts,” I say to my sister, who gets texts from her boyfriend all the time. “I wish I’d get less. I spend so much time answering Dean’s texts. He feels alone or like I don’t care for him if I don’t respond immediately,” she says, without looking up from her phone.

“The grass is always greener, I suppose.”

This saying brings to mind something someone recently told me about want. That want is fundamentally based in the logic of negative definitions. For example, when I say that I want for there to be no ants in my grandmother’s kitchen; and that I want for the thick years of dust that
have collected on the photograph of my mother and father taken the Christmas before they were married to be wiped away; or that I want to have known my grandmother intimately and before she was the way she is now, I'm saying that there are ants in my grandmother’s kitchen. I've seen the place where they come from: the void between the refrigerator and stove.

—

My mother has told me that there used to be a time when there weren’t any ants in my grandmother’s kitchen. “I keep a clean house,” my mother’s said. “I do a pretty good job, but your grandmother—that woman kept a spotless house. She wiped down the baseboards every week and always dusted the fixtures.”

I find it hard to imagine such a time. I look at my grandmother’s chandelier and try to picture it without cobwebs.

It’s hard to imagine, but there used to be a time when my mother and father didn’t know each other. It’s even harder to imagine a time when my mother and father were my age. My age is that age where older people have finally stopped telling me about how people my age think we’re invincible and think we know everything. You all think you’re invincible, they’d say. You think you know everything. Well, you know what? You aren’t, and you don’t.

I’m glad they’re no longer saying this to me. I find it sad when people strive to create such distances. And, for the record, I never thought I was invincible. I never thought I knew everything. However, I’ll admit that I may have imagined myself like Jim Morrison or Janis Joplin—tragic and immortal—but I never imagined myself invincible. I'll admit I thought I knew something about the world and how it was: how it could be.

I don’t know much of anything anymore.
What I do know is that when my mother first met my father’s mother, my mother was my age. When my mother met my father, they were immortal and could imagine their lives being many ways. When my mother met my grandmother, I know my grandmother cried.

What I don’t know is why she cried. My mother thinks it had something to do with baseboards and my grandmother’s imagination. My grandmother couldn’t imagine my mother’s baseboards or fixtures ever being as clean as hers.

All I really know is that we put our things and our bodies in our minivan and drove across swamps and marshes, deserts and plains. We drove a certain distance. We drove towards the mountains. We did not cross the mountains. We stopped the car. We called a realtor. We carried our things out of the minivan and into our new home. We all got older. We saw the ants arrive.

“Do you think that the ants would still be here if there wasn’t that gap between the refrigerator and stove,” I ask. My sister shrugs.

“Siri, remind me to buy caulk tomorrow.”

“Here’s your reminder for tomorrow at 9am.”

At night, we walk to Rita’s for water ice. When we leave my grandmother’s house, we pass through the room that used to be a dining room on our way to the front door. Like a watercolor, soft and undefined, I recall the edges of the large table we used to gather around. We used to place yams and string beans on that table. We all used to sit at that table. We used to not think about the ants. That table’s been gone for sometime now, replaced by my grandmother’s rented hospital bed, but my hips still recall its sharp edges and bruises that have long since faded when I pass through this space. I remember that table during Thanksgiving and remember sitting on phonebooks, so I could reach my yam or string beans. On phonebooks, I rose with swinging legs to the place where my family towered and shone, a white-hot constellation.
Now, when we walk through the room at night, my sister and I avert our eyes. The room is small and there is a makeshift toilet next to the rented bed, which my grandmother cannot get up from herself. My father does not avert his eyes but asks, “What kind of water ice do you want, Mom,” when we pass through the room. My grandmother asks for cherry. Coconut if they have it.

At night, my sister and I lie next to each other. We lie on two twin beds where my grandmother and grandfather used to sleep. There’s a gap between the beds that we do not cross when we’re awake and that we try not to fall into while we sleep. With the lights out, we talk until we’re tired. “Goodnight,” my sister says and rolls over.

“Goodnight,” I say, but I am not tired. I cannot sleep. I am lonely when I hear my sister’s heavy breathing. I wonder how far we travel in our sleep. A few feet maybe. Perhaps several hundred miles. Do we travel sideways or up, bursting into flame when we touch the outermost edges of Earth’s atmosphere?

I sleep with my phone beneath my pillow. I confide in it when I cannot sleep. “Siri,” I whisper, “how far away is the Earth’s atmosphere?”

“I found two places matching ‘atmosphere’ near you. Tap the one you want to call.”

Was the distance so little that I could call it?

I’m not sure if my grandmother sleeps. Her television is always on. If she does sleep, I can’t hear her heavy breathing over the TV’s steady drone. Through the bedroom walls, the television sounds very far away, like it’s submerged beneath water or floating in space. But I know that if the television were in space, we wouldn’t be able to hear its steady drone. The History channel is always playing shows about aliens, Nostradamus, and space on my grandmother’s television, which is how I know that the universe is always expanding. This is also how I know that if a television were floating in space, we couldn’t hear it. Space is a vacuum.
I call both listings for “atmosphere” but neither answer. Both numbers ring several times before going to voicemail. At the first number, I leave a message for my grandfather. At the second, I leave one for my sister.

“Siri, remind me to ask my sister tomorrow if she got my voicemail.”

“Here is your reminder for tomorrow at 9am.”

Outside my window, the pale edges of the morning sun wash across the night sky and begin to thin the darker color. The clouds are no longer on fire, but are white and rise. The clouds rise and disappear beyond the framework of the bedroom window. They rise beyond where I can see. I close my eyes. I ask Siri to remind me how to fall asleep.

I wake up and am reminded to buy caulk, brush my teeth, and make breakfast. When I catch a glimpse of my hair in the bathroom mirror, I ask Siri to remind me to shower.

“It’s time to wake up,” I say to my sister. I shake her shoulders, gently at first and then harder until she gets up from bed, and we go downstairs to the kitchen to make breakfast. When we pass by my grandmother’s bed, I see that she is sleeping. I open the refrigerator door for eggs, and my aunt’s very old cat appears and begins to howl brokenly. The cat lives with my grandmother because my aunt says that the cat likes it better here. I like that my grandmother has a cat that sometimes curls up on her chest when she’s lying in bed, but I want the cat to be a kitten instead of being old and sick like it is. Siri says that there are five cat years in one human year. The cat is nineteen human years old, which makes the cat ninety-five cat-years old. The cat is so thin that from far away it looks like a kitten. The cat’s eyes have a thin layer of film covering them and are always dilated. The cat has eyes like shiny black holes. When I first saw the cat and realized it was not a kitten, I felt badly that it was so thin and close to death. A few days ago, I began to feed the cat lunchmeats. Now it howls every time it hears the refrigerator open.

“The cat is blind,” my aunt informed us.
The cat is blind and moves very slowly, so it’s constantly in our way in my grandmother’s small kitchen. My sister unwraps a few slices of deli meat and dangles them in front of the cat. She allows the cat to lick the air a few times and weave a sad circle or two before placing the meats in his food dish and directing him to them. My father comes into the kitchen and pours himself a glass of orange juice.

“What are you making,” he asks.

“Pancakes and scrapple.”

“Your grandmother used to make the best pancakes,” he says. “Village Inn’s pancakes are almost as good.”

My sister and I laugh because my father says this very same thing whenever the word pancake comes up in conversation. I don’t have my grandmother’s recipe, so I look one up on my phone. I add ginger ale to the batter, which is supposed to make the pancakes fluffier, but they turn out eggy and cake-like all the same. When breakfast is ready, we all squeeze around my grandmother’s teal-legged table. We can’t all fit around the small table, so I stand. The cat decides to lay down in the middle of the kitchen floor.

It’s quiet as everyone takes the first bite of their syrup-covered pancakes or scrapple. The television in the next room washes over the silence. Then, my grandmother, father, and sister begin to talk. They talk about little things. They talk about the weather. They talk about the food and how it’s good. I do not think the food is good. The pancakes are dry. My mouth is dry. I want to ask them about something more than the weather, but I can’t talk. I want to ask them who their first kiss was and what it was like. I want to ask them for a glass of water, but they look so comfortable. In this moment, they look content and so close to one another, but I feel far away. I am far away from them and the table where they sit. I think about being closer and remember there’s an extra chair in the next room. I go to retrieve it.
In the next room, the television is playing a show about black holes. There’s some black and white footage of Charles Lindbergh taking off in a propeller airplane. The footage is playing to an old tune. The television says that Lindbergh once experienced a warp in space-time, a vortex or quasi-black hole, when flying above the Bermuda Triangle. He kept his experience a secret until the end of his career. After all, who would believe him? I grab the chair and return to the kitchen.

When I place the chair at the table and sit, I find that my chair is much shorter than all the others. The chair is so short that I can’t reach my pancakes or see my grandmother’s face. Near the trashcan are several phonebooks, which I gather and stack on my chair. I stack all the phonebooks and sit on them, but the table isn’t any closer than it was before. In fact, it seems farther away, and the teal-legs look somehow taller. I gather the toaster, microwave, pots and pans and stack them, but the table continues to grow. I gather the refrigerator and stove. I gather the ants, sofa, birdhouse, and garden. I gather all of the neighbors’ houses, their driveways, the Wawa, and Rita’s. I gather and stack every cheesesteak, every arrowhead, all the sage, and every smokestack. I caulk them all together.

“Siri, how do you climb a mountain?”

Siri retrieves an instructional video on YouTube, and I watch it. I am now prepared. I put on a harness. I put on a helmet. I tie a knot and begin to climb. I climb up and up. I pass flocks of geese, airplanes, and clouds. I rise faster and faster. I rise beyond. I reach the outermost edges of Earth’s atmosphere. I am a satellite. I am on fire.

Suddenly, I am in space. I am no longer burning but instead am the coolness of hard metal. I can see Earth, which looks the way you might expect, which is the same way all the planets look in Alien when Sigourney Weaver views them from her spaceship. In other words, it looks like it always does in every movie that’s ever been set in space. I can see all the stars, which are still far away. I can see my grandmother’s table, which is floating just above the Milky Way, and my family seated
around it. The television is here, floating in space, too. The television is on and my father, sister, and grandmother move their mouths, but I cannot hear anything except silence. The table is its own planet where people I know are eating pancakes and sharing syrup, sharing each other. This planet has its own atmosphere, and I am far above it. I am a satellite. I am cold metal in orbit. The cold metal I am was once mined from the core of this planet. I find my origins difficult to believe.

A metal object flies past me. As the object gains distance, I can see it’s an airplane. The airplane has a propeller on the front, and a scarf waves and trails from the cockpit. There’s someone manning the plane. The man looks like Charles Lindbergh, but I can’t say for sure because I can’t see well without my glasses. He gives me a thumbs up. As he does this, he and his airplane suddenly begin to change shape. The man and the plane begin to elongate. This happens slowly at first, starting with the nose of the plane, but then becomes faster. I can hear what sounds like the steady flow of air or water. The man and his plane elongate unrecognizably, and I can only comprehend what’s happening by imagining there’s an invisible straw that’s sucking them up. The steady sound gives way to a sucking one. With that, they are gone. The television, which was once far away, floats very near me now. The silence of space is broken by the soft voice of a man on the History channel. Gradually, his voice grows louder. But that can’t be right. Space is a vacuum. Space maintains its distance.

Beneath me, I see the table grow long on one end. Then, the television pauses momentarily before being sucked away into nothingness. I begin to shout and wave in an effort to warn my family of the black hole we’re about to collide with, but my voice is compressed and thin in space, and my gestures look more like an attempt to swim than they do a warning.

When I was a kid, I used to fear that a large meteor would collide with Earth. This meteor would extinguish us the way it did the dinosaurs. I liked dinosaurs. Because I didn’t want to be extinguished, I created an escape plan for Earth. This plan required that each and every person on
our planet jump into the air and then land on their feet at exactly the same time. I believed the resulting force would be enough to alter the course of Earth’s orbit, moving us from harm.

Recalling my evacuation plan, I wave and yell. I yell for my family to jump, but I’m too far away for them to hear me. I eventually give up, which is probably just as well. Planets aren’t like boats. They don’t have rudders or wheels to steer with. Powerless, I’m forced to watch as the table and my family disappears in the same manner as the television. I then begin to feel a slight breeze. It should be impossible to feel any breezes in space because it is a vacuum.

It is a fact that there are no breezes in space, which is why we question the footage of Apollo 11. Flags can’t wave in space without a breeze. Despite the impossible, I feel the breeze grow stronger, and I’m suddenly aware and very certain that I’m being sucked into the black hole.

It’s said that space doesn’t feel like anything. It’s said that space has no temperature or, for that matter, any other tangible characteristics to speak of. The truth is, we theorize about what space feels like but we don’t really know. We don’t know because there are very few people who have ever actually felt space with their bare hands. Very few people have ever actually felt space with their bare hands because humans need space suits to survive the conditions of a vacuum.

In 1966, a man experienced theoretical space, which is to say he felt space on Earth. On Earth, he felt space in an altitude chamber when a tear formed in his spacesuit. He lost consciousness and collapsed after fourteen seconds of exposure. After he regained consciousness, the only sensation he could recall feeling was that of saliva boiling off his tongue.

In 1971, three Russian astronauts died in space when their cabin depressurized. Maybe, when they realized there was no way they were going to make it home again, they took off their helmets and suits, just to feel what it was like. But even if they did, there’s still no one in existence who’s both felt real outer space and lived to tell us what it’s like. What it’s really like. So, until we feel space for ourselves, how can we know or say that it feels like nothing?
Feeling space now, I can say that it feels like many things. It feels like cold, dark velvet and longing. It smells like mulch in autumn after a long rain. It sounds like an Enya song, all echoes and reverb.

I collide with the black hole.

Those feel like something, too. A black hole feels somewhat like space, but different. Being sucked into a black hole feels like you might expect it to: nothing more, nothing less. It’s the feeling of weightlessness and high velocity. It looks the way lightspeed looks from inside the Millennium Falcon. It sounds like the electric hum of one thousand halogen lights. In the movies, black holes tend to look like hypnotic clocks. In theory, a black hole shouldn’t look like anything, but it’s impossible for us to comprehend something if it doesn’t have a recognizable form. A hypnotic clock is the form black holes most often take on in the movies. These clocks have black and white stripes—or every so often, red and purple—that are always swirling. The person who is falling into the black hole in this scenario is always stationary. However, in some lesser-known interpretations, the man who is falling waves his hands. This depiction isn’t too far removed from the reality of a black hole. In fact, it’s so close that we could almost touch it and call it a truth.

Almost.

Except, in the reality of a black hole, I am waving my whole body. I am falling like a cat. In the reality of a black hole, the stripes are not solid lines but are instead made of matter. They are made of all the objects you’ve ever touched and all the things you’ve ever seen and said.

You realize now that distance is made of matter. Matter is made of minivans, refrigerators, stoves, teak-legged tables, smokestacks, clouds, microwaves, cheesesteaks, and sage. Matter is made of ants.

You realize now that it was the ants that made the gap. You seem to remember a time when the refrigerator and stove used to be touching.
Stephen Hawking comprehends black holes by thinking of them as wormholes. Wormholes are not bottomless pits, but rather passageways. Wormholes, then, act as passageways from one universe to another, or back to another location in the same universe.

There’s a deafening roar as you’re thrown back into space. The wormhole closes like a Looney Tunes episode behind you.

You are cold metal in orbit. You are a satellite. You are a meteor. You are approaching Earth’s atmosphere. Then, you’re on fire.

A weightless eternity passes as you fall towards the place where your family waits for you.


You arrive at the table. Except there’s not a table. There’s no matter, only metaphor. Your father, mother, sister, grandfather, and grandmother are there. They are young, or rather timeless. They are holding hands, and you cannot tell where your grandfather starts and your father stops. They are them, and they are you.

They have been waiting for you to take the empty seat at their table and join them.

“You’re the last one here,” they say, as you pull the chair out from the table. “Good of you to join us.”

You take your seat, and this time, when you sit, you can reach your yam and string beans without phonebooks. When you take their hands, yours begin to disappear. Your phone, which you were gripping tightly and forgot you were holding, floats above the table.

As it passes above, the phone beeps. “Here is your reminder,” it says. The phone floats steadily away and then disappears beyond the table’s horizon. You smile. They smile. You are them, and they are you. This smiling is enough to let you know that they got your messages.

The dining room table sprouts figurative engines, which rumble and propel themselves forward with fire, and you and your family steer your way to the center of the black hole, towards a
point that is as small as the ball of a pen. You know now that you will fit. As you and your family converge with the point, you are compressed. All distance is lost.
McDonald’s

He had only been trying to make himself feel better.

Despite its proximity to the convention center, the Quality Inn his company had put him up in was depressing, to say the least. Upon arriving at the hotel earlier that evening, he’d opened the door to his room only to discover two queen beds. No one else from his office had volunteered to attend the conference, and he was only one man. One man does not need two beds. Two beds provided one man with too many options. Too many options agitated and perplexed him. But he had no choice but to choose, so he tested both beds several times for comfort: first the left, then the right, then the left again. He did this several times more before deciding upon the bed nearest the television. This decision seemed the more sensible of the two, as he couldn’t see a damn without his glasses. He ironed all his white shirts and black pants. He turned on the television, which only had six channels. Three of them were Spanish. He hated Florida.

He felt guilty for hating Florida.

It wasn’t exactly that he hated Florida, although it was true that he did possess a strong distaste for the state. Rather, he hated himself for allowing the Spanish soaps to anger him. He could learn Spanish if he chose to. He reconsidered his hatred and realized it wasn’t the Spanish soaps that angered him, not exactly. What angered him was the fact that there were equally as many Spanish channels as there were English. This was America.

He felt guilty. When had he become such a terrible person? He couldn’t remember. He attempted to convince himself that Florida wasn’t America. He couldn’t. He thought that if he’d been able to succeed in this task, he would’ve been able to believe himself a better person. Maybe even a good person.
But he hated Florida and hated that the state forced him to recall all the news stories he’d heard about alligators. It was because of these stories that he refused to take baths while in Florida and felt it necessary to check the toilet for alligators before relieving himself. He felt guilty for feeling this way and wished he weren’t so easily angered by Hawaiian shirts and the elderly. He couldn’t stand how slowly the elderly drove, and watching them eat made him sick. They ate like turtles.

He had, however, felt okay about the hotel carpet. Yes, the carpet was okay. Sure it was a little worn, but he couldn’t help but admire the thought someone had put into the design.

When designing carpet, there are many factors to consider. The designer must consider the location in which their carpet will be used. Will it be used in a public place like a hotel, fast food restaurant, or metro bus? Or will it be used in the private space of someone’s home?

He hated other people’s homes. Other people’s homes bored him.

When designing carpet for a public space, the designer must consider the degree of traffic for that particular space. How will the carpet wear, and where will it wear the most? What sort of color scheme and design will best disguise the stains of ketchup, soda, and dirty shoes?

But he was an accountant, not a designer, and did not know the answer to this question. Based on his previous observations of similar carpets, he inferred that the color scheme must be dark and the design ornate. He was a man of simple tastes and, being such a man, found most ornate designs hideous, though not necessarily displeasing. The carpet in his hotel room, which was the color of dark cranberry and covered by a blue and orange firework print, was in keeping with this opinion. *Who designs this stuff?*

He attempted to imagine the man or woman whose job it was to design carpeting. Unable to do so, he began to doubt if such a job even existed. As a child, he’d fallen into a deep depression when the post office returned his letter to the North Pole affixed with a stamp that stated: “No Such
Address.” He had cried. *You’re fourteen*, his father had said. *There’s no way you could still believe that crap. Right?* It was true that he hadn’t been without his suspicions, but he’d still believed. He’d still believed even when the other kids had made fun of him. His father hadn’t meant to hurt him, but he had just the same. He’d been depressed then, and he was depressed now.

He tried to translate the Spanish soaps to take his mind off the matter.

He couldn’t translate the soaps, so he invented small tasks for himself. When he’d finally finished choosing his bed, ironing his shirts and pants, surfing the channels, and considering the carpet, he hung his freshly pressed clothes in the closet. It was seven at night and still light out when he’d finished these tasks. He couldn’t think of anything else to do, and it was too early to sleep, so he decided to take a walk around the hotel’s perimeters.

Outside, there was nothing to do. There were no bars. There were no strip clubs. There wasn’t even a comic book shop. There was only the convention center across the street and the McDonald’s next to it. The convention center depressed him, so he went to McDonald’s.

In front of the McDonald’s stood a homeless woman asking for money. *I don’t have money*, he told her. He could tell she didn’t believe him. He really didn’t have money with him, just his company card, but he didn’t feel the need to prove himself to her, so he walked around her and opened the door. It’d been years since he’d last had McDonald’s. It wasn’t that he ate well. It was just that back in Chicago, Wok This Way was the closest restaurant to his office. He worked long hours and sometimes slept in his office, and Wok This Way delivered. He didn’t even have to leave his office. As he squinted at the McMenu, he wondered how long it’d been since he’d eaten anything other than Szechuan chicken or the occasional Hot Pocket.

He decided on the number five and approached the counter. There were two people in front of him in line, a man who looked to be a Harley rider in his mid-fifties and an elderly woman. Although there were several workers standing behind the counter, only one cash register was open.
The elderly woman was placing her order. She had several coupons that she held in her hand and waved in front of the cashier in a state of obvious agitation. The boy working the cashier looked young. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen. *Jesus, this was taking forever!* The Harley rider stared at the woman then turned and made a face that revealed he was thinking something similar. Sticking her coupons in the cashier’s face and pointing to their text, the elderly woman raised her voice at the boy in that particular manner people do when they converse with foreigners and intend to make themselves understood. Speaking as though the cashier were deaf, the woman then insisted upon speaking with a manager. She complained about the five dollars and forty-two cents her meal cost. *I have a coupon,* she yelled. She complained about the quality of her chicken during her last visit.

He wondered if she didn’t have anything better to do.

The cashier and manager spoke to each other in Spanish. He wished he spoke Spanish, so he could understand all the jokes they were surely making about the woman. He didn’t speak Spanish but was overjoyed when the manager refused to discount her meal further. *This,* he thought, *was justice.* He was glad to have seen it. He had no question that the elderly woman was a worse person than he, and this comparison made him feel superior.

He felt guilty. He was not superior. It was obvious that the elderly woman was lonely in her old age. He felt badly for her. She was as mean as an alligator, if not meaner, and had undoubtedly pushed all her friends and family away. They didn’t invite her to their homes on Christmas. They were afraid to even call. He looked at her left hand to confirm his belief. He saw no ring, so he looked at her right. Until a few months ago, he never considered the jewelry worn on a person’s right ring finger to indicate marriage. Then, he read somewhere that in some European countries, a ring worn on the right hand is indicative of a married state. The woman looked European, so he had checked her right hand. He saw no rings. Although he had wanted to see that she was lonely and
suffering, he was not overjoyed by his findings. He was a bad person for thinking such things, and this thinking depressed him.

He was not a bad person. In his youth, he’d been a good and very kind person. It was the world that was bad. It was other people that were bad. He had been good. He had been good before he’d seen too much of the world and had been robbed by too many people.

“I’ll take the number five,” he told the cashier.

They called his number, and he took his meal tray. He went to the dining room to find a seat, but the dining room was full of elderly people sitting by themselves. They sat by themselves eating their sad-looking McChickens or picked over the dead-looking lettuce in their Big Macs. He wondered how long it had been since their husbands and wives had died or had left them. He wondered if these sad-looking people with dull, black eyes knew they too would one day be cold and gone. He wondered if everyday they feared tomorrow. He did not want to fear his tomorrow when it came.

“What took so long, Mom?” he heard someone say. He looked around and saw the elderly woman shuffling towards the voice while she held her tray out in front of her. He saw that the voice belonged to a very attractive woman who was sitting in a booth with her husband and three children.

“Kids these days don’t have any respect for their elders! That’s what took so long. What’s the world coming to? I’m voting for Romney in the next—” her voice trailed off as she shuffled around the corner.

He felt guilty for being so presumptuous.

He felt guilty for feeling guilty. He turned from them. He opened the PlayPlace door and walked inside. Inside, the children were screaming. They had snotty noses, those children. He found the children hideous, though not necessarily displeasing.
Inside, he sat down between Ronald and the purple thing. He had never understood what the purple thing was supposed to be. Ronald and the Hamburglar were clear enough, but the purple thing? As a child, the purple thing had scared him. It was as scary as the Boogeyman and more foreign than a stranger. He would not have accepted candy from it had it offered. He was certain that it lived beneath his bed, everyday threatening take to his milkshakes, his very happiness. During his later childhood, he decided that the purple thing was an eggplant, and that made him feel better. But now that he was an adult, he needed to acknowledge that eggplants and McDonald’s had nothing to do with one another. Being an adult required a more logical explanation, which is how the purple thing came to be a chicken nugget. It had to be. Nothing else made any sense. Before he began working as an accountant, he ate more fast food. His newfound logic, however, made it impossible for him to enjoy chicken nuggets without thinking of the purple thing and its ambiguity. What was it? Was it really a chicken nugget? If it was, why was it such a dark shade of purple? He wanted to know who came up with the purple thing. He needed to know what it was, what it meant.

He had learned that chicken nuggets were made mostly of dark meat. He had heard that they stuffed the whole chicken into the grinder. Were you eating a chicken foot or a chicken eye? It was impossible to tell. In 2005, he had been an adult. Watching the news was, if not required, highly suggested of those who wished to be called adults and wanted to be respected as being such. So, in 2005, he had watched the news and had heard about the woman who found the finger in a bowl of Wendy’s chili. The woman sued Wendy’s. Or at least she tried to before it came to light that the finger had belonged to one of her husband’s coworkers. This was America.

As he ate his fries, his anger grew. He wanted to sue someone. He wanted to sue his father for shaking his belief. He could’ve at least pretended Santa was real.

He was disappointed but didn’t want the children to see him cry. He looked down at his shoes to hide his sorrow and noticed the tile. He found it hideous, though not necessarily
displeasing. The tile was different shades of brown. Some of the tiles were wooden. He could see the grain. *Well, that's shnazzy,* he thought. He thought of the man who thought to use tile instead of carpet in McDonald’s. That man was very practical. And wood! Tile is hideous, but the wood added a certain je ne sais quoi—but wait. *Was this actually wood? It could be laminate.* No. *It can’t be.* Oh, *but it could.* He had to know. He slowly lowered his index finger towards the floor. He stroked the tile. He felt the cold, smooth surface. He didn’t feel a grain. He noticed the black grout around the tiles. No one grouts wood.

No one was behind any of it: the carpet, the tile, the purple thing. All along he’d thought that someone was running the show. All along he’d thought there had been such a thing as the right thing. There was no right or wrong thing. There were only choices. He was horribly disappointed. He was terribly depressed.

He wanted to go back to an easier time. He wanted to have a room with one bed, or a room where the two beds were pushed together. He wanted to crawl back into the womb, back into meaninglessness. He wanted to feel better.

He did not remove his shoes as he climbed in the ball pit. He did not yield to the small children in his path. He made his way to the pink, enclosed slide and swung himself down its chute.

His hips, though, were no longer those of a child. The slide recognized this difference and bore down on his middle. Pushing against the slide’s roof with his hands, he attempted to regain momentum but only wedged himself tighter.
While some people were hurling themselves one-handed, over high bars, others were eating McDonald’s and drinking Cokes. Or at least that’s the way things seemed in America during the summer of the 2012 Olympics. The whole thing depressed me greatly, and despite my best efforts, I couldn’t understand how it was possible to cheat at badminton. It just didn’t make sense.

Yes, the Olympics depressed me. After all, watching other people perform great physical feats wasn’t exactly a self-esteem booster when I, along with millions of other Americans, could hardly ascend a flight of stairs without being winded.

What was worse was that deep down, I knew my mother wished I’d been an Olympian. I knew this because she’d told me so. Growing up, Olympic summers were a thing to be feared. During these summers, my mother made me train. In the weeks before the games began, my mother had me collect objects from the edges of our rural property that could be crafted into a wide variety of athletic equipment. As you might imagine, curtain rods do not make good or reliable high bars. After I’d moved out of the home and as far away as possible, my mother still wouldn’t let me forget her dream for my future and would call me every night of the games. I wish you’d been an Olympian, she’d say. Then, before I could even say hello, she’d hang up. I was never athletic, so I’ve never understood why this particular dream was the one my mother had built up for me.

During this particular Olympic summer, it seemed there was nowhere in town I could go without seeing someone fling themselves twenty feet into the air with a stick. There was nowhere I could go without seeing people with perfect bodies clad in spandex. And thanks to recent technological advances, there was nowhere I could go without cellphone reception. So, when my
attempts to build a concrete bomb shelter equipped with the necessary provisions to survive the summer failed, I decided that I’d travel abroad instead.

As I rolled my luggage through the sliding doors of the John F. Kennedy International Airport, I had no idea where I was going. The reason I had no idea where I was going was not at all figurative but instead quite literal. It was literal because I had purchased a mystery ticket. If you do not already know what a mystery ticket is, it is a type of fare offered, often at a discounted rate for a flight with an undisclosed final destination.

I’d searched for flights on Kayak, Expedia, and Travelocity that were destined for geographical regions such as the Yukon, Appalachians, and Siberia. In short, I was searching for locations that were out of touch with popular culture. That summer, I was really starting to feel the tabloids blurring the margins of my identity. The Kardashians were possessing me. I could hardly make it through a sentence without using the word literally or Bible. I knew how to use literally in a sentence. It was an abomination. I literally needed to get out of touch. Fast.

However, the airfare for out of touch locations was surprisingly steep. I’d just about given up hope on the whole prospect of travel when I stumbled upon the mystery ticket. The mystery ticket was cheap, and the thought of traveling abroad, by myself, to an unknown locale seemed both dangerous and romantic.

As I removed my steel toed Dr. Martens and set my Ziploc full of liquids in an examining tray, I was a bad ass. I was living the dream. I had purchased a motorcycle jacket and expensive sunglasses for the occasion. I made sure that my copy of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas flashed in the eyes of every man, woman, and child who walked past me. I felt this was fair warning. The people had a right to know that they were about to board a plane with a person of such wild abandon. I wore my sunglasses through security with the hopes that someone would mistake me for a celebrity—for Emma Watson. No, Emma Stone—and ask for my autograph. No one did.
It was depressing to me that I even cared to be mistaken. Here I was, trying to get away from it all, yet I was unwilling to part with my Dr. Martens, which were this season’s latest fad.

Disgusted with myself, I boarded the plane and found my seat, which took a considerable amount of time seeing as the comparative size of an international aircraft carrier is roughly equivalent to that of a blue whale.

After making my way down the aisle, I found seat 457C. A window seat. Window seats are not coveted by anyone except children. When you’re a child, it’s fun to watch the clouds go by and imagine that they’re made of marshmallows. Your teachers once told you that clouds were made of precipitation, not marshmallows. You could not walk on clouds, they said. But deep in your heart, you knew they were wrong. One day, you’d walk on clouds. One day, you’d show them.

It’s true that window seats are exciting for children. For adults, however, they invoke fear and thoughts of the great astronomer Tycho Brahe. I remember having learned in a history class that Brahe’s bladder burst during a banquet at which he’d been pitching a great innovation to royalty in Prague. He died. His death shouldn’t be surprising. A burst bladder isn’t something that chicken noodle soup can fix. A burst bladder is a fatal condition. Brahe allowed his bladder to burst because he’d believed that excusing himself from such an occasion would have been a breech of etiquette. Poor Brahe. Poor me. The people in the middle and aisle seats would fall asleep, and I’d be forced to climb over them, wet myself, or allow my bladder to burst.

Taking my seat, I made peace with my fate and awaited the arrival of my neighbors. I left my jacket and sunglasses on. Perhaps they’d think I was a celebrity. Perhaps the man sitting next to me would be handsome and witty. This man would mistake me for a celebrity and fall madly in love with me. We’d spend our hours feeding one another peanuts while we watched Titanic in 3D, the inflight movie, wound tightly in one another’s arms.
I wondered where I’d gotten this idea from. The Bachelor or Bachelorette? My hope for such romance was unrealistic, but I wasn’t ready to part with it just yet.

So, like all of the other single Americans on my flight, I held onto my hope. However, like every lonely American, my hopes were dashed when my balding neighbor wedged himself into the seat next to me. His supple thighs spilled out beneath his armrests, onto my seat, and finally settled in such a way that they grazed mine. I took this as a bad omen, a sign that this flight would surely kill me.

Once everyone had taken their seat, the attendants moved down the aisles, ensuring that the luggage was properly stored. The overhead compartments were closed, the cabin doors were sealed, and the plane was pressurized. Once a plane is pressurized, there is no going back. There’d be no going back to all those people with perfect bodies clad in spandex. There’d be no going back to those stands filled with celebrity gossip magazines. There’d be no more Star, no more US Weekly, no more People. There’d be no impossibly perfect people to compare myself to: how unfathomable, how fabulous!

Until recently, I had always read the airline safety manual before take off. I had thought it was important to be well-informed in the event of an emergency. However, after having a conversation with a woman who was in flight attendant training at a bar a few weeks ago, I realized that in the wake of a real emergency, no one would be walking in calm, single file lines to the exits.

“I own seventeen percent of a private jet,” the flight attendant at the bar had informed me.

“If you own a jet, why are you training to be a flight attendant?”

“Because I’m going to China in three months with some friends. See, there are ten of us but only nine seats. Regulations state that there can be ten of us on the jet so long as one of us is a certified flight attendant. In short, I’m doing it for the extra seat.”

“Oh.”
The woman had been very excited about her training. She had a dark sense of humor, so thinking about things like laptop batteries exploding into five foot tall flames in the cabin of a crowded airplane that was thousands of miles above the dark Atlantic amused her.

“During an emergency landing,” the woman informed me, “it’s not women and children first. If you’re on crutches or handicapped, you go last. And believe me, we’ll make sure you go last.”

“How often do planes make emergency landings?”

“Only about ten thousand times a year.”

“Jesus.”

“That’s actually not a lot. I know it seems like a lot, but in terms of percentages it’s something like one percent.”

This percentage had not assuaged my newfound fear. Ten thousand was not and never would be a small number in my mind.

The plane raced down the runway, the front wheels lifted and then the back. We began to gain altitude and moved away from Earth at a forty-five degree angle. I looked out the window and watched the world grow small. The highways and skyscrapers looked like a delicate board game or a model for a housing development that had yet to be built. I singled out a blue house below. I thought: there’s your house! I knew full well, however, that my selection of the house had been arbitrary. The only thing the house below had in common with my own home was that both were blue, but I was nearsighted and this general resemblance was enough to convince me. Bye, house! I said to the house that wasn’t mine. We climbed higher and higher. The people on the streets were the first to fade, then the cars, then the homes. From my window, the world looked like a quilt stitched together by rivers. The plane was now parallel to the ground.

“We’ve reached a cruising altitude of thirty thousand feet,” said the captain, and the man next to me began to snore. This snoring, however, was not a natural or healthy sounding snore. It’s
said that everyone’s unique, so it stood to reason that so was every snore. I respected the uniqueness of this snore but found the milky froth that began to form at the corners of the man’s mouth alarming.

“Did you know that you don’t perform CPR on someone unless they’re dead,” the woman at the bar had asked me.

I said I hadn’t known. Whenever you see people performing CPR in the movies, the recipient always seems very alive. Take for instance that scene in The Sandlot when the attractive female lifeguard rescues Squints from the deep end of the pool.

“Yeah, I never realized they had to be dead either, but they do,” she said after I’d admitted my ignorance on the matter. “There’s ways to tell if a person’s dead,” she’d continued. “It’s different for men and women. Men, you push them as hard as you can right here,” she indicated towards the soft spot beneath my sternum with her clenched index knuckle. “Women, you pinch right here, along the artery in the shoulder. I won’t do it to you ‘cause it’d hurt like a motherfucker.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

The man sitting next to me snorted loudly and then was silent. I realized it’d been years since I’d taken that CPR class for my babysitting credentials. Do you push on the chest or below it? I walked through my memories of mannequins in an attempt to recall the information. It was useless. My memory of the Heimlich was much more clear. I stuck my finger in front of the man’s mouth to see if I could feel him breathing. I could.

Behind me, a woman was blowing her nose rather violently. I held my breath. Contracting Ebola had always been a great fear of mine. I couldn’t decide which was worse: a child kicking my seat or an infectious person blowing their nose in my direction. I held my breath. Things continued like this for a long time: the woman would begin blowing her nose, and I would hold my breath.
During the interims of silence, I would take small sips of air. I thought I was on the verge of passing out when I finally realized that the woman was not ill, but sad. I looked around to see if the person who was the source of her sadness was also on the plane. No one I saw appeared guilty, and the woman next to her who was reading a book titled *A Guide to Understanding Men: If You Want Closure in Your Relationship, Start with Your Legs* did not look in anyway related to the sad woman. As I did one more survey in the hopes to reveal the perpetrator, I noticed there was not a single child on the flight. There was no perpetrator. There were no children. There weren’t even any teenagers. If there weren’t any children, it stood to reason that there were no families either. Again, I surveyed my surroundings and found that my hypothesis held true. There were no families. There were no couples using one another as pillows or feeding each other peanuts. The harder I looked, the more I found. Around me, there wasn’t a single person sporting a wedding, engagement, promise, or even college ring. We were a people untethered.

We were a helium balloon, and someone had let go of our string. We’d been lighter than the world, so now we careened recklessly towards the clouds. We were making a break for it.

I kicked off my Dr. Martens.

Suddenly, around us, the sky grew dark, very dark. In fact, it was the darkest shade of dark we’d ever seen. Then, it happened. We were engulfed by a brilliant and searing white.

*Black and white are not colors.*

This is something that was told to me by my grandmother who was an artist. Whether or not this same grandmother is trustworthy is another question entirely. I remember drawing her a picture of the beach at Ocean City. I also remember her refusing to hang my drawing on her refrigerator until each and every umbrella and beach towel had been shaded realistically.

We are told many things many times until they become a part of us. These things are a part of us, but we don’t understand them. *Keep your hands to yourself. Don’t stare at the man in the wheelchair.* *Black is a shade. White is a shade. Why? Because. Because. Just because.*

As we were engulfed by the most brilliant white we’d ever seen, and would surely not see again until the moment of our death, I understood. For a moment anyway. White is a shade because you can live in it. A shade is something that offers shelter.

The cabin lights began to flicker violently. Shuddering, the plane fell from flight. The yellow oxygen masks exploded from their receptacles and swayed like jungle vines. It was beautiful. Static overtook the cabin. Through the intercom we could hear the pilot saying something.

“Flight attendants… please put… please put… please. Please, please, please.”

The plane regained power and steadied itself. I looked at the man sitting next to me, and he looked at the man sitting next to him. We all looked at the brick-like phone that was cemented to the seatback, just above the grey, foldout tray. “Is there anyone you’d like to call?” we asked each other. This, after all, was the polite thing to do, as there was only one phone to share between us.

Although the proposition of using the phone excited us very much, we could not think of anyone to call.

“We could make a prank call,” suggested the man on my left. We were debating whether we should call Pizza Hut or Wells Fargo when the plane shuddered its most violent shudder yet and again began to fall. This sudden movement caused the masks’ dangling, plastic tubes to slap against our faces. We’d been too startled to remember to put them on.

Someone sitting several rows behind us yelled, “Put your masks on everyone!” And that reminded us.

Then, something remarkable happened. We reached for the masks and made sure that the tubes were fully extended. We performed this task with great ease, as though out of habit.
we had been designed precisely for this one moment. As though the completion of this one small action was the sole purpose of our lives. As we pulled the masks towards us, we lost consciousness, or at least this is what we all agreed had happened when we later recounted our adventure. So, we lost consciousness.

We collectively lost consciousness in the same way one might lose her keys. Where was the last place I had them, she asks and in slow motion traces her every step through the late-afternoon city until she’s standing again in the morning before her front door. She walks backwards from her office to the coffee shop. Bite by bite, she puts her buttered bagel back on its plate and her black coffee back in its mug. She moves backwards through the door and walks down the crowded street, her hair is made of anemones and waves from someplace beneath the ocean’s surface. Light refracts off her pale body, as she, and only she, makes her way home in reverse. She passes all the men and women who have stopped to stare at her, this dream of a woman. At last, she refolds her newspaper and sets it back on the stoop then reaches for the keys in her pocket. But the keys are not there, and she can’t recall the measure of their weight in her hand. She can only recall a momentary blackness. She can’t recall whether or not she even locked her door that morning.

She speeds backwards through all her memories. Beneath the bleachers, she says goodbye to her college friends as they take sips of whiskey out of the flask she hid beneath her gown. She says goodbye to her mother and father and drives down the road towards college with a mattress tied to the roof of her little, red car. She walks away from her high school boyfriend who tells her there’s someone else. She’s held onto all these memories and realizes that before this very moment she thought she’d one day return to them. She’d one day pull back into her parents’ driveway, untie the mattress from the roof of her little, red car, set the mattress back on the bedframe, and again arrange her stuffed animals before her pillows. She feels stupid for believing that she’d kiss her high school boyfriend again and by doing so prevent him from loving anyone else, more or ever. She realizes
now that she’s always been moving away from everything, like a car. Like a car on a road trip, there were small billboards on the horizon that grew larger. Then, larger still. Then, for a moment, as the car whipped past their metal stalks, the signs were still. The car was still. The whole world was still. Then, with a great rushing sound, the billboard faded until it was small and gone in her rearview mirror.

This very thing is exactly what happened to us when we reached for our masks.

And when we regained our consciousness, we were doing a remarkable thing. We were doing this thing to each other. We were stretching the elastic around the backs of one another’s heads. We were doing this thing despite what we had learned and had always been told. We were not putting ourselves first. We were not pretending we were Brad Pitt or Emma Stone.

I took off my sunglasses.

We placed the masks on each other’s faces and gingerly adjusted the elastic to ensure a snug fit. We were doing this remarkable thing. We were doing it to each other. We were doing it out of love.

The plane fell and then rose, fell and then rose, but we were not afraid. We rode that plane like a rollercoaster. We rode that plane with joy in our hearts. We squealed with the delight of children.

It’s unclear as to how long we carried on in this manner of rising, falling, and squealing, but we think it was for quite awhile.

What is clear to us is that at some point, the lights in the plane came back on, and we steadily regained altitude.

At some point, the man to my left extended his index finger and pointed out the window with wide eyes. “Look,” he mumbled through his mask. I did.

It was a sight worth seeing.
Outside, the sky was a remarkable shade, a shade of pink. It was pink like the pink of our dreams. It was a pink we never believed existed outside the space of our own hearts. But here it was, as though it had always been. We were all very excited, and no one had to pee. Outside our window, there were things even more magnificent than that impossible shade of pink. Outside our window, the clouds were marshmallows. There were great pillars made of candy that supported the weight of glimmering castles.

“There’s a bouncy castle big enough for all of us,” yelled the man who had reminded us to put on our masks.

“Please put… please put… Please put on the song,” the captain finally managed through the intercom.

Over the intercom we heard music. It was soft and indistinguishable at first, but then grew clear. The song went something like, “We can go where we want to, a place that they will never find, and we can act like we come from out of this world, leave the real world far behind.”

I took off my motorcycle jacket.

“We can dance,” said the man to my left. He was right. We could dance, so we did. And so did everyone else. We danced. We did it all. We picked the phones up, out of their cradles and called one another. We didn’t worry about the bill. We told each other our secrets and fears. We talked all day and our ears never grew weary of one another’s voices. The flight attendants served us Diet Coca-Cola and made sure that we never went without. Instead of cups, they gave us the whole can. The soda’s fizz made our chests feel lighter than they’d ever felt before. We all felt slim and found one another terribly attractive. Here, in this mysterious place, it didn’t matter that I wasn’t Emma Stone. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t an Olympian. And here, the woman behind me no longer cried.

Our dancing and talking went on forever.
After forever had passed, as every forever eventually must, the pilot thanked us for flying with him. The flight attendants opened the cabin door, and we all made our exit down the stairs and towards the clouds like Jackie O. We exited with wild abandon and did not test the clouds with the weight of our big toes, as we’d been taught to test the oceans or icy lakes back on Earth. We jumped towards the clouds. They were marshmallows, and we were as light as bubbles. We were light and then lighter. In that shade of pink, beneath a winsome light, we all made our way towards the bouncy castle on the horizon hand in hand. It was truly fabulous.
I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter!

It was during my residency at Memorial Hospital that I saw my first, and to this day only, living, human heart. Sure, I’d seen hearts before: pig hearts, shark hearts, rat hearts. I’d even seen Ida’s heart.

Ida was my human cadaver. Actually, she was my lab group’s cadaver. My lab mates didn’t call her Ida though. They didn’t call her anything, or if they did they simply called her The Cadaver. Ida was a secret name, a name I alone knew.

I’m not sure whose heart I saw in the hospital that day—in surgery, the face and body are most always covered with blue paper—but I saw it just the same through the little operating room window. I wasn’t supposed to see the heart, or the ribs splayed open like deranged wire, I was only supposed to see them put valves into a woman’s snaky veins, which had been blocked and constricted by decades of indolence and too much McDonald’s.

I had excused myself from the surgery I was standing in on that day. The stench of cauterized skin had really gotten to me that morning for some reason. When you cauterize skin, it smokes and rises. The smoke’s so smoky you can see it. It smells putrid, like nothing you’ve ever smelled before in your life. It smells, but not like barbeque or anything else you might imagine. It smells like alchemy, like metal. I had to get away.

I wanted to be forthright. I always want to be forthright but rarely find it in myself to be so with strangers. I wanted to say, would you please excuse me forever from this situation? I’m not cut out for this, but I was young and timid and afraid of disappointing my parents, so I simply said, “Excuse me, please.” And with that I exited the sterile room and entered the sterile corridor that contained many more similarly sterile rooms like the one from which I had just taken my leave.
It was here that I saw the heart. When one sees their first human heart beating within the chest of a stranger, it is impossible not to feel. I mean, you feel something. A connection, human empathy, call it whatever you’d like, but it’s there and it’s electric and it’s calling your name and you can’t turn your back on it. You just can’t.

So there I was, stopped and just standing before this strange heart that was calling my name, and I couldn’t help but to wonder so many things. Did the heart have a wife or a husband or anyone to feed them soup and sit them upright and change the channel when it recognized that the daytime soaps were just reusing the same plotlines over and again? I hoped that the heart had someone. I hoped for this very much. I hoped for this because elderly patients mainly occupied Memorial Hospital. Elderly patients occupy most hospitals. I’ve worked at enough hospitals to know this is true. Working at Memorial though, I learned something about life. I learned that when you’re old, no one sends you flowers or comes to visit because your partner or friends are either gone or have brittle hips that can’t make it up the flight of beige stairs to where you are.

In that hallway I had a selfish moment. I wondered: is this thing going to happen to me?

The first time I met Ida, we had expected her to be face down. It’s less personal that way. When we opened the body bag, however, we found that she was face up and sort of smiling. We had to turn her over. She was heavy and somewhat stiff, so this wasn’t exactly easy. That day, we practiced how to hold the scalpel and how to make incisions in the back. That day, she didn’t have a name.

It wasn’t until we had to work on her face up that her namelessness became a problem. That day, when we flipped her over again, I held her hand out to the side to keep it from getting pinned beneath her while my lab mates turned her over. It felt strange to hold her hand. I tried to pretend the hand belonged to someone living.
We were told not to give our cadavers names. To do so would be disrespectful to them. The cadavers already had names, names that had been given to them by their mothers and fathers. They had names their husbands and wives had once called them by. They had names that we would never know.

I knew better than to name her, but when I held her hand, it felt human. I noticed the soft hairs on her knuckles. I noticed the look on her face. It was like she was sleeping.

The day I named her was the day we opened up her chest and saw her heart. When we pressed our scalpels into her skin, I knew that her heart wouldn’t look a thing like the heart we know: the one of Valentine’s cards, the one I’ve etched on trees. I knew her heart would be different, I just didn’t know how very different it could be.

At my apartment later that night, I still had the heart on my mind. It was quiet in my apartment. I remember how, for a moment, I thought the beating of my heart was not my own. I remember turning on the TV to drown out the sound. My favorite program on Food Network, *Giada at Home*, had just gone to commercial break, so I decided to wait it out.

During the break, there was a commercial for Heineken beer. There was also one for State Farm insurance, but it was the juxtaposition of the commercials for I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter! and Liptor that set me off. I had been okay with the I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter! commercial, in which a very sexy Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City* consumes, very sexily, a piece of toast that is spread in a similarly seductive manner with the product and which is then fed to her by a handsome Parisian named “Jacques”.

In fact, I had been more than okay with the commercial. For a moment there, I would even say I was sold. With 70% less saturated fat and 30% fewer calories than butter—and not to mention all the handsome, foreign men who would soon be dying for the chance to feed me toast—I had no
doubt whatsoever that with I Can’t Believe it’s not Butter! my heart would, in more ways than one, be in good hands.

But before I could delve more deeply into my dream of a heart so fine and devoid of plaque and bursting from so many romantic prospects, the commercial for Lipitor—which features Dr. Robert Jarvik, the inventor of the similarly named Jarvik-7 artificial heart, as its spokesman—came on. The information disclosed by the commercial was more than alarming, to say the least. Information like even doctors and inventors of artificial hearts become afflicted by high cholesterol; and that, for many people, a good diet and regular exercise may not be enough to prevent a future failing of the heart. Even with the use of I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter! as my one and only phospholipid substitute, the welfare of my heart could still remain uncertain. This thought was, for me, perhaps the most unsettling; and then there was the discovery that if I ever desired to use Lipitor as part of my health regimen, I would first need to submit to a test which checks to ensure that my liver is in proper condition, which I could only assume to mean that Lipitor is likely to eat away at my liver. My liver. And I hadn’t even considered the well-being of my liver until this moment. But then, the most terrible realization of them all dawned on me: there’s more to a body than just a heart and liver. My own heart was now racing, and I began to shake my foot wildly to obscure the beating. I then also clutched at my heart with a hand that felt like a stranger’s; the latter of which I did in what I presume was an attempt at keeping my heart from exploding inside my chest, which I knew, even then as I clutched, wouldn’t do shit for me in the event that my heart were actually on the verge of stopping. Or bursting. Or both.

Standing before the little operating room window in the hallway, that heart was everyone’s: it was Ida’s, it was a stranger’s, it was mine. We were all on the table.
“Holy shit. I’m going to die!” This exclamation paired with my inability to control the volume at which it burst forth caused the few people who were also passing through the hallway to jump and look at me in a perturbed manner, the look of which quickly gave way to fear after they had taken a moment to consider my face, which I can only imagine looked very unwell.

“Jesus Christ! What’s wrong with you,” said Jess, who was one of the few people in the hallways and who was also a fellow resident and friend. Jess placed her hand on my back, which was comforting, and we both stood in front of the window and stared at the heart for a long time.

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By the time I went to lab the next day, I’d already forgotten about the commercials from the night before. Today would be my last day with Ida. After spending six weeks with her, today would be the last. Today would be the day we dissected her face.

I looked at Ida’s face. It was still terribly human, thanks to the embalming fluid. Her eyes were half-closed, and her brown hair, pulled into a top bun, was beginning to mat. As we began to dissect her face, she became utterly unfamiliar to me, utterly inhuman.

It’s funny to think about the difference a face makes.

By this point in the lab, Ida had been entirely dissected. Flaps of skin hung open and revealed her red and yellow innards. Her hand, the one I’d held the day we met, was bloated. The stench of her was wretched. I was no longer able to make up her story. I couldn’t think of her as a person walking down the street. I couldn’t draft up a story about how she came to have those metal rods in her wrist.

I would never donate my body to science. This would never happen to me.

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But as I looked at the living, human heart in front of me, I realized that many things would happen to me. Maybe I’d get married one day. Maybe I’d have kids. Maybe I’d pass the boards.
Maybe I wouldn’t do any of these things. Regardless, many things would inevitably happen to me, and unless some unforeseen developments in the medical industry were to take place, death would one day be one of them. Statistically speaking, escaping death is impossible, so I’d just have to be ok with it.

“Thanks. I think I’m going to be okay now,” I said to Jess.

“That’s good. What the hell just happened?”

“I guess it seems half-witted now that I really think about it, but I think what happened was that I just realized for the first time that I’m going to die. I mean, I’m alive now, but someday I won’t be anymore.”

After a very long pause, Jess said, “It’s true that we will all be dead—like, really dead—someday.” Jess nodded her head up and down—as though to say “yes”—and her lips were at the angle of a shrug. “But as long as I can make it up that flight of beige stairs, I will come to where you are.”
It had been a big summer for all of us. I got a promotion and bought my first house, Lars and Anna got married, and the first IKEA in New York opened not far from my home. It was a big summer, a very exciting summer, and our hearts bobbed in the wake of our new beginnings.

I took in the empty space of the apartment I’d lived in for so long, closed my eyes, and tried to burn an image of the four white walls and the angles where they met into the backs of my eyelids. It was an admittedly unorthodox place to keep an image, and I had, for a moment, considered a more traditional form: a Polaroid, a shoebox. My eyelids, however, seemed my best option. I knew, from the movies or from somewhere else, that anything worth preserving must be kept from the sun.

“I can’t go alone?” I’d asked Anna before the wedding. I’d been single at the time and had been for several months: eighteen, to be exact. I’d been counting the time I’d been single in months rather than years because they were far kinder units of measure.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you can’t go alone. Are you really telling me that you can’t think of a single person to ask, no one you have the hots for?”

“Well, no.”

I’d told her this, but it wasn’t true. The truth was that I had no moves. I had the shortest eyelashes ever put on a woman. How could I make sweet love moves without eyelashes?

“There isn’t a single person who crosses your mind more than once a day?” Anna asked.

“No. Not really.”

“Well,” said Anna, “do you ever flirt with men?”
“I say hello to them sometimes.”

“That’s not what I mean. Do you ever, you know, show a little cleavage?”

“What?”

“Do you bat your lashes, lick your lips, or let your skirt creep dangerously close to the place where the sun don’t shine when you’re sitting at a bar?”

“I don’t have lashes, and I’m really horrible with the fake ones. They always come off at the edges and make my nose look more European than it already is.”

“My point being that every time I see you, you’re wearing more clothes than a nun. If you want a man, you’ve gotta work it a little. We’re not talking prostitution here. Just heels and boobs. A tight dress wouldn’t hurt either. Go grab my makeup bag from the bathroom, and I’ll show you.”

“Is that how you met Lars?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Anna.

“I had no idea.”

“Well, now you do. You know what? I just got an idea. Why don’t you let me set you up with a guy from my work.”

“Is he cute?”

“Jenny, this man’s more than cute. I’d even go so far as to say he’s dashing.”

“What’s his name?”

“It’s Andy. Sorry, no it’s not. It’s Andrew. He hates when people call him Andy. I’m the only one he lets call him that. It’s become somewhat of an inside joke between us.”

“Andrew. I like it. It’s a strong name you can’t really go wrong with, and I’ve never dated an Andrew before, so that’s a plus. Do you know him through work?”
“Yeah. We met at a new hire meeting when I first started at Goldman Sachs. I’ve known him awhile, and I have the perfect excuse for the two of you to meet. You know Jockum Nordström, right? Lars’s friend?”

“Was he that painter who wore an ushanka to the black-tie party you hosted awhile back?”

“That’s him.”

“I don’t really remember him all that well, but I do remember watching that ushanka sail across the room about a hundred times before Jockum could finally get it to land square on the stag head above your fireplace. What was the deal with that again?”

“Oh, gosh. The party was strictly a black-tie event. I asked him to take off his hat once privately, but he refused. So, I waited until the right moment presented itself—which occurred when I saw him conversing with Marcel Dzama, the watercolorist whom I’m sure you remember, and David, who needs no epithet—before approaching him again. Anyhow, when I approached Jockum in front of Marcel and David, I didn’t ask but demanded he either remove his ushanka in the terms I prescribed or leave at once.”

“Oh, yeah. I kind of remember that now, but what does that have to do with you setting me up?”

“So, get this. There’s an opening next week at David Zwirner. It’s a group show, and Jockum’s work will be featured. Lars and Jockum are very close, so he gave us an extra invite. What’s better though is that I just so happen to know that Andy’s going to be there. I’ll introduce you. Please say you’ll come.”

I sighed. “You said he’s dashing?”

“Utterly.”

“Alright.”
The following week, Anna did my hair and makeup before the opening. I picked out a dress from her closet. In her living room, she taught me how to flirt.

“I’ll tell you what,” Anna said, swirling her wine. “In all my years of dating, the most important thing I’ve learned is that if you want to be happy, you need a man you can mold. It sounds simple, but not all men are pliant.”

“So, how can you tell if a man’s pliant?”

“You can’t at first. In new relationships, men always behave well because they want to get laid. So, it takes time to know if a man’s pliant. I wasn’t able to tell with Lars until we started to ease out of the honeymoon phase. Once we did, I was able to start testing his malleability with small things: opening doors, not leaving the toilet seat up, those sorts of things. Once he started doing those things consistently, I moved on to the bigger things: taking out the trash, getting the mail, and doing the dishes. Once I got him to do those things without having to ask, I started pushing for the most important things: I’m always right, weekly date nights, and no guys’ nights without my permission.”

Here, Anna laughed. “I’m kidding about the last things. Sort of. I’m not that much of a control freak. Oh! I almost forgot the prerequisites. He should always pay, and he should allow you to dress him. Believe it or not, getting Lars to dress well was my biggest challenge. The man loves cargo shorts and running shoes.”

“I can’t see Lars wearing cargo shorts at all.”

“That’s only because I’ve never let you see Lars wearing them.”

“I see. So, what you’re saying is that if I can get a guy to do all those things, he’s a keeper?”

“Yes, but only if he does each and everyone of those things as though it’s as natural a thing to do as breathing.”

“You think Andrew’s pliant?”
“I do, but there’s only one way to know for sure.”

With that, we finished our drinks and made our way to the gallery.

—

Lars was always going to openings it seemed. Openings bored Anna, so she always brought me along when she could. Lars was an experimental filmmaker, but he hadn’t made a film in years. *My work is misunderstood*, he once told me, in a thick Swedish accent, when I asked him about it. *People are idiots! When they cannot understand my films, which is always, they just criticize them instead. Finally, I said to myself: Lars, you are a genius. If these idiots think they can do better, let them!*

I was sympathetic to his sentiments because I’d never had an interaction with another living thing that’d ever made me feel understood: not even in the most fractional of ways. After that conversation, I decided to watch *Folkmord*, and things started to change. *Folkmord* was Lars’s last film. In the film, an urban trash can takes its own garbage out to a dumpster in a monochrome alley. The whole thing is about an hour long, although it might be longer. I can’t really remember. All I know is that it moved me. The critics, however, attacked it. They said it had no tension. What they failed to understand though was that the true genius of *Folkmord* was not in its plot, but rather in the subtlety of its subtext and Lar’s ability to control the world he’d built. His control was as effortless as wind in grass.

Despite Lars’s work being misunderstood, he still managed to befriend the swankiest and most Germanic people in the city. Lars’s swanky friends had heavy accents and a penchant for debating typefaces. As an assistant professor of digital art and design at CUNY Community, I was well equipped for such conversations.

“Oh, but Helvetica is just so banal anymore,” said one of the thick-tongued Swedes. “It’s everywhere! It’s like air!”
Anna stood next to me, wearing a black dress and holding a glass of champagne. She yawned and stared vacantly across the gallery. Anna had a strong understanding of visual aesthetics, but typography bored her.

“The ascending terminals are just so magnificent. You can’t deny that, Ingmar. what other font has—”

“That’s him,” Anna said, elbowing me. “That’s Andrew. I’ll go get him. Stay here.”

Across the gallery, I saw Anna greet Andrew by kissing him on both cheeks. He said something, and she laughed. She pointed to me. I waved. Anna offered Andrew her elbow. He locked his arm in hers. With their heads thrown back in laughter and their straight, white teeth exposed, they made their way to me.

“Oh, my,” Anna said, still laughing as she approached me. The two unlinked their arms, and Anna rested her hand on her chest in a gesture suggesting something of an attempt to calm her laughter. “Andrew, this is my friend, Jenny. Jenny, Andrew.” Andrew smiled warmly, again revealing his perfect teeth. Beneath his well-groomed stubble, I could see his symmetrical dimples. The man was clearly blessed.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, Jenny,” Andrew said, extending his hand. I met his hand with mine. “Anna’s told me only good things. In fact, the way she spoke of you made me wonder if you actually even existed.” His grip was firm, but polite. His hands were square and masculine. His hands relieved me. In the field of design, one mostly tends to encounter hands of the waify sort. I find such hands hard to trust.

“I exist, and I’m glad to see that you do, too,” I lowered my head as I said this but maintained eye contact, just like Anna showed me to. It’ll make your eyes look smoky and mysterious, she’d said. Men love a good mystery. Andrew seemed to respond well to this move.

Across the gallery, I caught Lars’s gaze.
“So, Jenny, what is it that you do?” I shifted my focus to Andrew. The man looked like Don Draper. I told him the small things: how I’d interned for Bruce Mau out of college, how we lost a big account, how I was the youngest and newest employee, how they had to lay me off, how I went back to school, how the economy sucked, and how that led me to my job at CUNY.

“So, Anna tells me you two work together?”

“We do. Well, sort of. Anna’s an internal auditor, and I’m an investment banker,” he told me, but I found it hard to concentrate on anything other than his resemblance to Don Draper.

“Sorry, what I’m about to say is totally off-topic—“

“Go ahead.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like Don Draper?”

“No,” he laughed, “but I’m flattered you think so.” I smiled. He finished his drink. “Looks like I need another. Looks like you do, too. Pray tell me, what does the lady like to drink?”

I blushed and diverted my eyes to the ground like Anna had taught me. “Champagne would be great.”

“One champagne, coming right up. How was my impersonation of Don Draper?”

“Absolutely Shakespearean.”

Andrew smiled and walked away. His gait was not that of Don’s, but that was something we could work on. I couldn’t believe that no one had ever noticed Andrew’s strong resemblance to the *Mad Men* lead. I guessed that was probably a good thing. It meant he hadn’t been molded yet.

At the bar across the way, Andrew turned and smiled at me, toasting me with my fresh glass of champagne.

I could work with this.

I waved to Andrew, and he smiled then struck up a conversation with Lars, who was also standing at the bar. I went over to Anna and asked what I should do next.
Under her supervision, the night went well.

Not long after Andrew and I started dating, I got promoted. When I told him the news, he insisted we celebrate by having dinner at Eleven Madison Park, which I’d never been to but knew was a very fancy restaurant. I knew that “very fancy” in New York meant something quite different than it did anywhere else. I’ve heard the Country Kitchen described as being “very nice” by my grandmother, who lives in Jersey. I’d never dined anywhere that could be considered “very nice” by New York’s standards before, so I had no idea how to dress.

I took my best shot at it though, putting on pumps and the new dress I’d bought specifically for the occasion. I did my makeup, painting smoky eyes like Anna had showed me. I put my hair up and then went to Anna’s.

Lars opened the door, looking impeccable in a designer suit.

“Oh, Jenny,” Anna said and hugged me. After we’d hugged, she held me at arm’s length and studied me. “Oh, Jenny. You look great, but that dress! It’s just not right for Eleven Madison.”

“Oh no! And I tried so hard. What am I going to do, Anna? I don’t have time to find another dress.”

“I’m sure I have something that will work. Go pick out a few dresses from my closet, and then I’ll help you decide which one you should wear.” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

I walked down the long hallway towards her bedroom, their bedroom. The place where she and Lars slept. In Anna’s house, the hallways seemed somehow longer and better decorated than the hallways in other people’s homes, my home.
The decorations in my own hallway consist of the following. A picture of my parents on their wedding day. My parents are divorced and have been for almost two decades. A cheesy inspirational poster that one of my students gave me at Christmas, which I felt compelled to have framed. It’s the one about destiny where there’s a picture of a boat shored up on an island that you could probably never afford to visit. The caption reads: the choices we make, not the chances we take, determine our destiny. I hadn't been given a Christmas gift by a student before and haven’t been given one since, so I was excited. Besides, I had a Groupon for a framer. There are pictures of my pets. There’s a picture from one Halloween at college, pictures of me and people I’m no longer friends with holding red Solo cups and making that face we all used to make by sucking in our cheeks and looking away from the camera. Kiss face. That’s what we called it. We thought it made us look hot, but in these pictures we just look desperate. Like we’re waiting for someone else to enter the frame and press their lips to ours.

Most people’s hallways are like this.

Even though I know these wall hangings in their cheap frames look like crap, they make me feel better. But maybe better’s not the right word, or just not the one I’m looking for. Better is too approximate. While the act of approximating is most frequently associated with the field of mathematics and is most often applied to numbers, the process of approximation can also be used in typography. In typographic design, an approximation is a representation of something that isn’t exact, but is still close enough to be useful. So, my crappy wall décor doesn’t make me feel better. It just makes me feel less alone. I must be the worst designer ever. I guess that’s why I teach.

There’s something about the word alone that connotes both space and emptiness apart from its definition. Emptiness isn’t a word that’s used to define aloneness, or at least it’s not in the definitions I’m looking at. What I mean to say is that while aloneness denotes isolation from others, you don’t have to be standing in the middle of a desert in order to be alone. You could be walking
down 5\textsuperscript{th} Avenue and the scalpers could be calling out to you, telling you that they’ve got the hook on Broadway and that your life isn’t complete until you’ve seen Wicked and cried on the shoulder of the stranger sitting next to you. They could be looking right at you and mouthing their mouths, and you could still feel alone.

Perhaps the compulsion to associate emptiness with aloneness is purely synesthetic and visually derived. Let’s say you encounter the word alone somewhere. Maybe you encounter it plastered to the inside of a bathroom stall in the Staten Island Ferry terminal in an advertisement for some online dating service that’s written in purple Comic Sans. Or maybe you encounter it as you pass the MoMA on your way home. Glued to the gift shop window is some artist’s formalist, typographic rendering of the word. Each letter is half a story tall and set in some stark euro font. Sans-serif or not, you see it, this o sitting right in the middle of this word. Its body is hard, a closed line full of space. The letter is practically all space. In most any other word or setting, its proportions would feel familiar. But here, when considered in relation to the consonants seated on either side, its shape seems foreign, impossible even. The o is unpaired and alone, its body more like a barrier than a bridge, a lake that cannot be crossed. And on either side of this lake stand the beautiful letters, their ligatures and serifs become arms and hands, those things that point towards preference.

Here, the word alone might as well be Christmas at the mall. All the turtle-necked couples swarming. All the turtle-necked couples so effortlessly color-coordinated. All the turtle-necked couples holding hands and feeding one another Auntie Anne’s pretzels. All the beautiful turtle-necked couples. All the beautiful turtle-necked couples swarming. And then there’s you, in the middle of it all. You with your hard line and closed body. You, all full of space. You standing in the middle of the swarm. And it’s then, when you realize that these people are holding one another and buying one another iPads or diamonds, that you feel empty.
Anna is not most people. She doesn’t break beneath the weight of silence, doesn’t clear her throat. Instead of um, so, or yeah, she uses fully formed sentences. Her hallway is the most perfect shade of bluish gray and is devoid of inspirational posters and pictures. She doesn’t need these things, these fillers.

I arrived at the bedroom door. It was closed, so I turned the handle gently and opened it. Soft light flooded the grayscale bedroom and stung my eyes, which I shielded with my hand. After a moment, my eyes adjusted. I stepped inside. Inside, everything was white or pale gray and immaculate: the soft carpet beneath my feet, the neatly made bed, the drapes, the dresser. Everything. On top of the dresser were a few pictures in white frames. The frames were nice and not crappy, not cheap like the ones I owned. I picked one of the pictures up off the dresser and held it in my hand. The picture was perfect. Anna doesn’t have gratuitous décor in her home, and what little décor she does have is somehow perfect. Like Anna, her home knows when to hold its tongue and when to say something, and when it does say something, each line is well-wrought, fully formed, and delivered as articulately as any elbow, any knee.

This picture of Anna and Lars was just that: well-wrought, fully formed, articulate. In the picture, Anna and Lars are standing somewhere outside in autumn. There are bluish mountains in the distance, their peaks white with snow. These unbelievably fucking perfect mountains disgust me. These mountains are the kind of supermodel mountains you see all the time in the movies or in tourism pamphlets, but never in real life. Anna and Lars don’t look real in the picture either. The shot’s too flawless, too perfectly timed. In the picture, Anna and Lars are looking at each other and laughing. They’re not posing or posturing in any way, and there’s not a kiss face in sight. They seem so at ease with one another that if you were to show this to anyone with two eyes, they’d be unable to deny that the two people in the picture are authentically in love.
Upon being shown this picture, anyone but a saint would be overpowered by the need to say something venomous, something and anything at all that might negate and destroy the possibility that anyone could have a love so authentic. Anyone would feel okay about acknowledging the existence of a perfect, authentic love at a theoretical or conceptual level. However, to acknowledge that there are two real people who exist outside the space of movies and who breath the same air as you and who might actually possess such a love would be monstrous. You’d have to deny it. You’d say that these people are fake or Photoshopped or that they’ll probably be divorced soon. You’d say it involuntarily and without even thinking, as though saying it were as necessary and inevitable as a heartbeat. You’d say it because acting in any other fashion would be inhuman. Standing in the sunlight before an audience, you’d deny it. But as you laid by yourself in the dark stillness of your bedroom, the picture would haunt you. In that dark stillness of your bedroom and within the stillness of your heart, you’d be unable to deny it to yourself.

Anna’s perfect picture stared like the sun. The perfect picture was perfect, and I wanted it. So, I took it: in my hands, off the dresser, in my purse. I took it as my own.

—

Later that night, Andy came to my house before dinner. “Can I make you a drink, Andy?” I asked.

“It’s Andrew.”

“I picked up this book earlier today that teaches you how to make retro cocktails, Andy. I could make you a Side Car, an Old Fashioned, or perhaps you’d like a Manhattan?”

“You know, a beer would be great. I’m not much into hard liquor.”

“You know what,” I said, “I have a better idea. Why don’t you just let me surprise you?”

“Alright, alright.”
I finished making our drinks and carried them to the living room where Andy was sitting. I handed him a Manhattan and took a seat beside him. I took great care not to spill my Side Car as I crossed my legs at the ankle. “What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s a Manhattan.”

He smiled. “I’m really not a whiskey kind of guy.”

“Oh, come on. Every guy’s a whiskey kind of guy. Just try it.”

“Alright, fine. I’ll try it.” Andy took a sip and grimaced. “It’s delicious, really,” he said, setting the drink down. He stood up and went to the kitchen where he grabbed himself a beer. I made a mental note to get rid of the beer for next time.

At dinner, Andy drank more beer and I more Side Cars. I let it slide for the time being. In a month’s time, I told myself, he’ll be drinking his whiskey neat. After dinner, we drunkenly hailed a cab and made our way back to my apartment. No sooner than we’d made our way through the door, Andy was kissing me.

“Hold on, hold on. Let me set my things down,” I said. I did and then returned to him in the hallway. Andy fervently began unbuttoning my jacket and kissing me again. “Maybe we could move this to the bedroom?” I suggested.

“Yeah. Okay. Sure.”

In the bedroom, we undressed. It was then that I noticed Andy’s boxers. “Are those Scooby Doo boxers?” I asked.

“I want you to live with me,” he said.

“Well, that was fast.”

“I’m serious, Jenny. I love you,” he said, as he climbed on the bed.

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow night.”

Andy kissed me. “Fine.”
The next afternoon, I went over to Anna’s to ask her advice. Lars opened the door. When Lars wasn’t at openings, he was at home, opening the door. He hadn’t made a film in years.

“Oh. Anna didn’t tell you? It’s säsongen upptagen.”

“It’s what?”

“Säsongen. Säs—shit. How does one say, uh. The. The changes of the year?”

“Do you mean the seasons?”

“Yes. That’s it. It’s her busy season at work. She won’t be home until the evening for the next few weeks.”

“Oh.”

“You’re welcome to stay and wait for her though. She’ll be back in an hour or so.”

I should’ve gone home, but I didn’t. “Ok. I’ll wait. Thanks, Lars.”

“Come on in and make yourself at home. Can I fix you a drink?”

“A drink would be great.”

“What would you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Surprise me.”

After a few minutes, Lars brought me a Side Car and set a Manhattan on the table for himself.

“You like Manhattans?” I asked.

“You know, I do. I didn’t at first, but then Anna got me to liking them.”

“How’d she do that?”

“She just kept making them for me,” he laughed. “If you drink something enough you end up liking it, I guess.”

“How long did that take?”
“For me to like it?”

“Yeah.”

“A long time. At least a year.”

“I don’t have that kind of time.”

“What?”

“Oh, I just meant that that’s a long time to drink something you don’t like.”

“Yeah. I suppose it is.”

“So, I just watched Folkmord, and I’ve been dying to ask you about it.”

“What about it?”

“What’s it about?”

“What do you think it’s about?”

“I think it’s about emptiness. About being a shell of your former self.”

“You should be a critic. Even Anna doesn’t understand, but you do. I don’t like to talk about my films. I gave that up years ago. I’ll make an exception just this once though. Folkmord is about giving up control. Or that’s what it’s about for me. But that’s all I’ll say.”

The front door opened and Anna walked in. “Hi, Lars. Oh. Jenny! Hi. What’s going on?”

“Andy asked me to move in with him.”

“That was fast.”

“I know. I don’t know what to do.”

“Seal the deal. Say yes.”

—

A few months later, I was moving out of my apartment and into a house with Andy.
“I can’t believe it’s all finally starting to happen,” I said to Andy, as we sat on cardboard boxes full of dingy Tupperware and nursed our coffees and backs, which were sore and tired from packing up my apartment in preparation for our big move.

“It’s really here, I said.”

“You know what I think, Jenny?”

“No. How could I?”

“I think it’s been here all along.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means. We’ve talked about this before.”

Then suddenly, we were fighting. It was an old fight made out of old words. Nothing new. Something to do with me not appreciating what I had, not recognizing that I had a good life. A graphic designer who’s got no sense of aesthetics living a cushy life in academia, I believe were Andy’s actual words. Something to do with him not proposing to me yet. You love Goldman Sachs more than me, I think I may have said. I confess that it was a stupid and childish thing to say and was hardly tied to any real truth. I’m always saying things I don’t mean. It was the best thing I could come up with in the moment. It was a perfectly generic thing to say, something that I’d learned from TV. Except, on TV this argument always worked in the favor of the woman who said it, the husband eventually crawling on his knees with a rose in his mouth as a gesture of his supplication. I’d seen it work on TV time and again, so I said it. Every woman’s said it. I said it loudly because he was pissing me off, and I wanted to make him mad. If I made him mad enough, he’d leave. With him gone, I wouldn’t have to think about what was really bothering me or be forced to sort it out by articulating it to him. So he left quietly, throwing his hands in the air. He wasn’t one to slam the door behind him. Thank God, I thought, as he slipped out the door, which I took to be a sign of victory. “He always thinks
he’s right,” I said out loud without even thinking. The sad thing about it, which I realized even as the words still rung in my ears, was that he usually was right and that he’d been right just now.

I had to be out of my apartment in an hour, which was when the new renters were slated to arrive with their boxes, and there was no way I could move all my things by then without help. I’d shot myself in the foot, so to speak. I regretted picking a fight with Andy before he helped me pack up the rental truck. I regretted regretting this because who wouldn’t? I didn’t want to think about it. I picked up the phone to call Anna then remembered she was out of town on a business trip. But it was the weekend, and as far as I knew Lars was around, so I called him. He was home, he said. No, he wasn’t doing anything, and he’d be happy to help. Was he sure? Of course he was. He really wasn’t doing anything. In fact, he was still in his pajamas. He’d be over in ten.

He was over in five, and in less than an hour we managed to pack up the rental truck.

“I’ll follow you to your house and help you unpack this stuff,” he said, wiping dirt off his hands on his jeans.

“You don’t need to do that. You’ve already done more than enough.”

“No, it’s okay. I really don’t have anything better to do. Besides, Anna would kill me if she knew I didn’t help you out.”

I smiled a sort of halfway smile, feeling somewhat disappointed to hear that Lars probably wouldn’t have come to help me if it weren’t for Anna. “Thanks, I said. I’ll buy you some beer or something. What do you like?”

“Anna doesn’t like keeping beer in the house. She thinks it looks tacky.”

“Oh. Well then, wine it is.”

“Wine it is,” Lars echoed and got in his car.

By the time we’d finished unpacking the truck and taking the boxes inside to my new house, it was pretty late.
“Do you have any plans for tonight,” asked Lars.

“Well, I was thinking I’d go down to IKEA while I still have this rental truck for a few more hours. This house is a lot bigger than my old apartment, and I need a bigger sofa and new bookcase. I probably need a lot more than that, but I figure that’s a good starting place. How about you?”

“Nothing. When Anna’s out of town, I usually go play poker with some friends, but it seems that everyone’s in the doghouse with their wives or girlfriends this week, so that’s not happening.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah. So, like I said, I’ve got nothing going on tonight. If you want company, I haven’t been to check out that new IKEA yet, and I’d be happy to go along for the ride.”

“Sure. That’d be great.”

We both got in the truck, which I drove. We made the drive in good time. Parking, however, was a total nightmare. There were so many cars waiting to enter the parking structure that I thought for a minute I might have teleported to a rush hour on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. There were men in reflective vests directing cars as though they were commercial jets.

“Jesus. It’s like Disney World or some shit,” I said to Lars who laughed.

“Yah. It’s pretty nutty, and this isn’t even opening day. Good people watching though. Look that guy.”

“Did he just pick his nose and then eat it?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say that’s exactly what he did.” We both laughed at this.

Finally, we parked. Well, I got out and Lars parked. I’d never parked such a large vehicle in such a small spot before and didn’t have much luck. We then made our way to the entrance.

“Jesus. It’s even crazier inside than it was outside,” I said to Lars.

Inside, we were immediately forced onto a winding path with about a million other people.

“Oh my God. It’s like the lazy river, only without inner tubes,” said Lars.
“Or deodorant.”

“Or deodorant. It’s like the…uh…like the contemporary trail of tears.”

“With better design and less dying.”

“Who’s to say we won’t die here. The night is young, and this is just the beginning.”

“True.”

So we walked the sinuous trail, crammed up against strangers, like ants. We walked past someone’s hypothetical bathroom, master suite, and study. We walked for what felt like a very long time until we noticed that there were less people walking with us than before. “Must be close to closing time,” Lars said. “Have you seen anything you like?”

“Yes,” I said, grabbing him by the hand and pulling him off the trail and into the showroom of a grayscale bedroom. In the bedroom, everything was gray or white and immaculate. There was a dresser with a few picture frames. In the frames were photos of the same perfect looking couple. There was a bed and a mirrored closet.

“This looks a lot like my bedroom,” Lars said.

“I know it does,” I said softly, pushing him onto the bed with the palm of my hand. “Hold on just a minute, I’ll be right back.” I went to the kitchen and found a bottle of wine, and opener, and some glasses and brought them back to the bedroom. Somehow, I knew exactly where the stereo was, and I put on the song “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea.” Lars was sitting on the bed, perfectly lit by the Vidja Table Lamp’s gentle glow. I handed him a glass of wine. “I’ve wanted this for a very long time,” I said.

I’m not sure what happened next. If I unbuttoned his shirt, stopping to kiss each newly exposed inch of flesh, or if I took off his belt, my blouse.

“Are those Scooby Doo boxers you’re wearing,” I asked Lars.

“Yes. Why?”
“I don’t know. I guess I just thought you were the kind of guy who’d wear boxer briefs.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing,” I said.

I pushed Lars onto the bed.

Soon enough the whole world was spinning, and I was on top of it.

I was the sun.

—

I looked down at Lars. He was asleep on the bed. The bedroom was now completely dark, and I rolled off the bed and crawled on the floor in search of my clothes. Once I’d found them, I put them on before the mirror. In the darkness, I caught the lingering gaze of my eyes in the mirror. The eyes were Anna’s. They were mine. I closed them. Anything worth preserving must be kept from the sun.


