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Iain Reid

"Brilliant." — *THE GUARDIAN*

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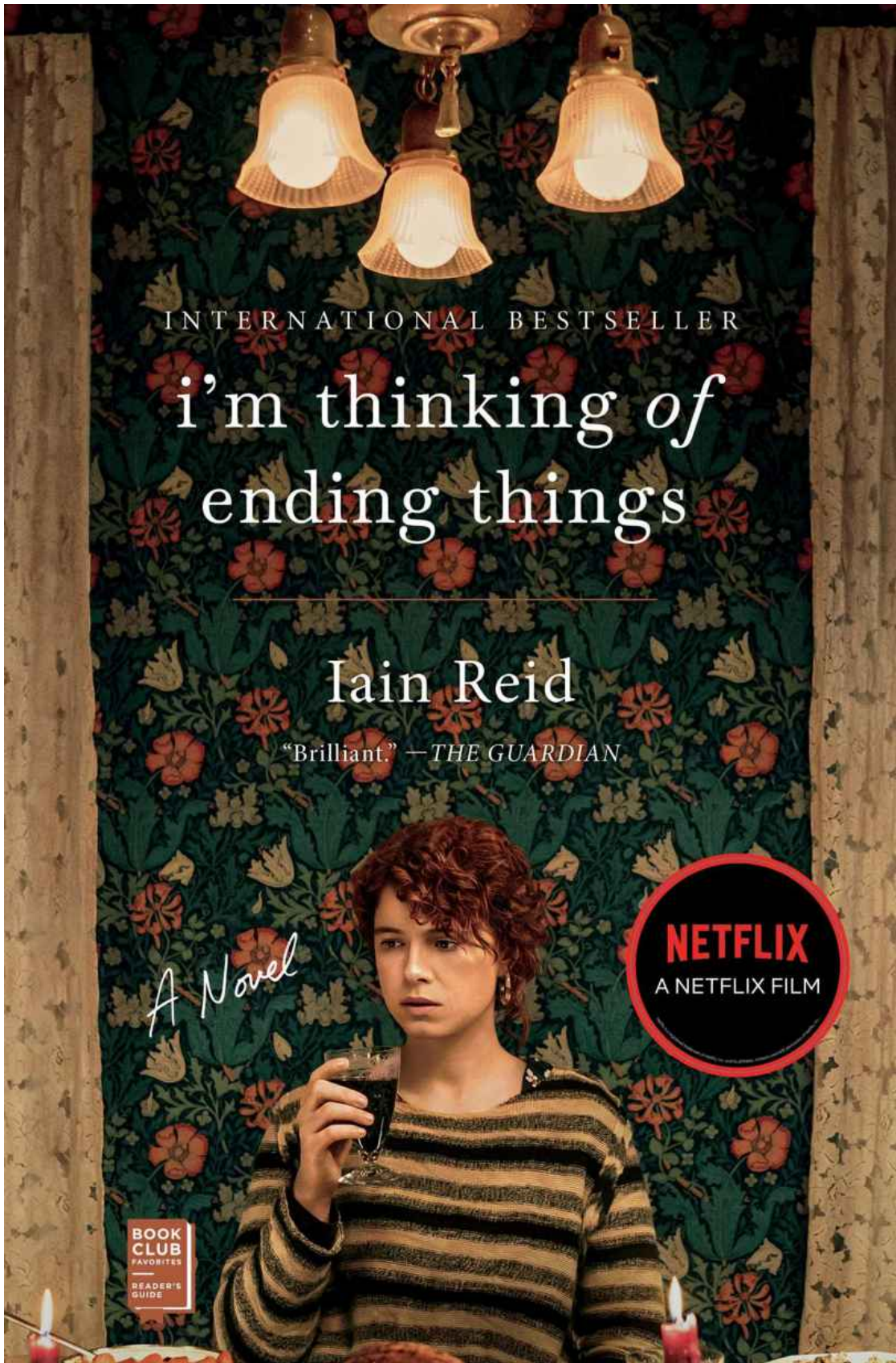
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I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS

Iain Reid



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To Don Reid

I'm thinking of ending things.

Once this thought arrives, it stays. It sticks. It lingers. It dominates. There's not much I can do about it. Trust me. It doesn't go away. It's there whether I like it or not. It's there when I eat. When I go to bed. It's there when I sleep. It's there when I wake up. It's always there. Always.

I haven't been thinking about it for long. The idea is new. But it feels old at the same time. When did it start? What if this thought wasn't conceived by me but planted in my mind, predeveloped? Is an unspoken idea unoriginal? Maybe I've actually known all along. Maybe this is how it was always going to end.

Jake once said, "Sometimes a thought is closer to truth, to reality, than an action. You can say anything, you can do anything, but you can't fake a thought."

You can't fake a thought. And this is what I'm thinking.

It worries me. It really does. Maybe I should have known how it was going to end for us. Maybe the end was written right from the beginning.

The road is mostly empty. It's quiet around here. Vacant. More so than anticipated. So much to see but not many people, not many buildings or houses. Sky. Trees. Fields. Fences. The road and its gravel shoulders.

"You want to stop for a coffee?"

"I think I'm okay," I say.

"Last chance we'll have before it becomes really farmy."

I'm visiting Jake's parents for the first time. Or I will be when we arrive. Jake. My boyfriend. He hasn't been my boyfriend for very long. It's our first trip together, our first long drive, so it's weird that I'm feeling nostalgic—about our relationship, about him, about us. I should be excited, looking forward to the first of many. But I'm not. Not at all.

"No coffee or snacks for me," I say again. "I want to be hungry for supper."

"I don't think it'll be a typical spread tonight. Mom's been tired."

"You don't think she'll mind, though, right? That I'm coming?"

"No, she'll be happy. She's happy. My folks want to meet you."

"It's all barns around here. Seriously."

I've seen more of them on this drive than I've seen in years. Maybe in my life. They all look the same. Some cows, some horses. Sheep. Fields. And barns. Such a big sky.

"There're no lights on these highways."

"Not enough traffic to warrant lighting the way," he says. "I'm sure you've noticed."

"Must get really dark at night."

"It does."

IT FEELS LIKE I'VE KNOWN Jake longer than I have. What has it been . . . a month? Six weeks, maybe seven? I should know exactly. I'll say seven weeks. We have a real connection, a rare and intense attachment. I've never experienced anything like it.

I turn in my seat toward Jake, grabbing my left leg and bringing it up under me like a cushion. "So how much have you told them about me?"

"My parents? Enough," he says. He gives me a quick look. I like the look. I smile. I'm very attracted to him.

"What did you tell them?"

"That I met a pretty girl who drinks too much gin."

"My parents don't know who you are," I say.

He thinks I'm joking. But I'm not. They have no idea he exists. I haven't told them about Jake, not even that I've met someone. Nothing. I kept thinking I might say something. I've had multiple opportunities. I just never felt certain enough to say anything.

Jake looks like he's going to speak but changes his mind. He reaches out and turns up the radio. Just a bit. The only music we could find after scanning through several times was a country station. The old stuff. He nods with the track, humming along softly.

"I've never heard you hum before," I say. "That's a quality hum you have."

I don't think my parents will *ever* know about Jake, not now, not even retroactively. As we drive down a deserted country highway to his parents' farm, this thought makes me sad. I feel selfish, self-centered. I should tell Jake what I am thinking. It's just very hard to talk about. Once I bring up these doubts, I can't go back.

I've more or less decided. I'm pretty sure I'm going to end it. That takes the pressure off meeting his parents. I'm curious to see what they're like, but now I also feel guilty. I'm sure he thinks my visiting his family's farm is a sign of commitment, that the relationship is expanding.

He's sitting here, beside me. What's he thinking about? He doesn't have a clue. It's not going to be easy. I don't want to hurt him.

“How do you know this song? And haven’t we heard it already? Twice?”

“It’s a country classic and I grew up on a farm. I know it by default.”

He doesn’t confirm that we’ve heard the song twice already. What kind of radio station plays the same song over again within the hour? I don’t listen to the radio much anymore; maybe that’s what they do now. Maybe that’s normal. I wouldn’t know. Or maybe these old country songs all sound the same to me.

WHY CAN’T I REMEMBER ANYTHING about the last road trip I took? I couldn’t even say when it was. I’m looking out the window, but not really looking at anything. Just passing time the way one does in a car. Everything goes by so much faster in a car.

Which is too bad. Jake told me all about the landscape here. He loves it. He said he misses it whenever he’s away. Especially the fields and sky, he said. I’m sure it is beautiful, peaceful. But it’s hard to tell from the moving car. I’m trying to take in as much as I can.

We drive by a deserted property with only the foundation of a farmhouse. Jake says it burned down about a decade ago. There’s a decrepit barn behind the house and a swing set in the front yard. But the swing set looks new. Not old and rusty, not weather-beaten.

“What’s with the new swing set?” I ask.

“What?”

“On that burned farm. No one lives there anymore.”

“Let me know if you get cold. Are you cold?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

The glass of the window is cool. I’m resting my head against it. I can feel the vibrations of the engine through the glass, each bump in the road. A gentle brain massage. It’s hypnotic.

I don’t tell him I’m trying not to think about the Caller. I don’t want to think about the Caller or his message at all. Not tonight. I also don’t want to

tell Jake that I'm avoiding catching my reflection in the window. It's a no-mirrors day for me. Just like the day Jake and I met. These are thoughts I keep to myself.

Trivia night at the campus pub. The night we met. The campus pub isn't somewhere I spend a lot of time. I'm not a student. Not anymore. I feel old there. I've never eaten at the pub. The beer on tap tastes dusty.

I wasn't expecting to meet anyone that night. I was sitting with my friend. We weren't really into the trivia, though. We were sharing a pitcher, chatting.

I think the reason my friend wanted us to meet at the campus pub was because she thought I might meet a boy there. She didn't say that, but that's what I believe she was thinking. Jake and his friends were at the table beside us.

Trivia is not something I'm interested in. It's not *not* fun. It's just not my thing. I'd prefer to go somewhere a little less intense, or stay home. Beer at home never tastes dusty.

Jake's trivia team was called Brezhnev's Eyebrows. "Who's Brezhnev?" I asked him. It was loud in there and we were almost yelling at each other over the music. We'd been talking for a couple of minutes.

"He was a Soviet engineer, worked in metallics. Era of Stagnation. Had a couple of monster caterpillars for eyebrows."

This is what I'm talking about. Jake's team name. It was meant to be funny, but also obscure enough to demonstrate a knowledge of the Soviet Communist Party. I don't know why, but this is the stuff that drives me nuts.

Team names are always like this. Or if not, then they're blatant sexual innuendos. Another team was named My Couch Pulls Out and So Do I!

I told Jake I didn't really like trivia, not at a place like this. He said, "It can be very nitpicky. It's a strange blend of competitiveness veiled as apathy."

Jake isn't striking, not really. He's handsome mostly in his irregularity. He wasn't the first guy I noticed that night. But he was the most interesting. I'm rarely tempted by stainless beauty. He seemed a little less part of the

group, as if he'd been dragged there, as if the team depended on his answers. I was immediately attracted to him.

Jake is long and sloping and unequal, with jagged cheekbones. A little bit gaunt. I liked those skeletal cheekbones when I first saw them. His dark, full lips make up for his underfed look. Fat and meaty and collagenic, especially the bottom one. His hair was short and unkempt and maybe longer on one side, or texturally different, like he had distinct hairstyles on each side of his head. His hair was neither dirty nor recently washed.

He was clean-shaven and wore thin-framed silver glasses, the right arm of which he would absentmindedly adjust. Sometimes he would push them back up with his index finger on the bridge. I noticed that he had this tick: when he was concentrating on something, he would smell the back of one hand, or at least hold it under his nose. It's something he often still does. He wore a plain gray T-shirt, I think, maybe blue, and jeans. The shirt looked like it had been washed hundreds of times. He blinked a lot. I could tell he was shy. We could have sat there all night, beside each other, and he wouldn't have said a word to me. He smiled at me once, but that was it. If I'd left it up to him, we never would have met.

I could tell he wasn't going to say anything, so I talked first.

"You guys are doing pretty well." That was the first thing I said to Jake.

He held up his beer glass. "We're helpfully fortified."

And that was it. Ice broken. We talked a bit more. Then, very casually, he said, "I'm a cruciverbalist."

I said something noncommittal, like "huh" or "yeah." I didn't know that word.

Jake said he wanted his team's name to be Ipseity. I didn't know what that word meant, either. And initially I thought about faking it. I could already tell, despite his caution and reticence, that he was exotically smart. He wasn't aggressive in any way. He wasn't trying to pick me up. No cheesy lines. He was just enjoying chatting. I got the feeling he didn't date all that much.

“I don’t think I know that word,” I said. “Or the other one.” I decided that, like most men, he would probably like to tell me about it. He would like it better than if he thought I already knew the words and had an equally varied vocabulary.

“Ipseity is essentially just another way to say selfhood or individuality. It’s from the Latin *ipse*, which means self.”

I know this part sounds pedantic and lecture-y and off-putting, but trust me, it wasn’t. Not at all. Not from Jake. He had a gentleness, an appealing, natural meekness.

“I thought it would be a good name for our team, considering there are many of us but we aren’t like any other team. And because we play under a single team name, it creates an identity of oneness. Sorry, I don’t know if this makes any sense, and it’s definitely boring.”

We both laughed, and it felt like we were alone together in there, in that pub. I drank some beer. Jake was funny. Or he at least had a sense of humor. I still didn’t think he was as funny as me. Most men I meet aren’t.

Later in the night, he said, “People just aren’t very funny. Not really. Funny is rare.” He said it as if he’d known exactly what I’d been thinking earlier.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I said. I liked hearing such a definitive statement about “people.” There was deep confidence bubbling just under his veneer of restraint.

When I could tell he and his teammates were getting ready to leave, I thought about asking for his number or giving him mine. I desperately wanted to but just couldn’t. I didn’t want him to feel like he had to call. I wanted him to want to call, of course. I really did. But I settled on the likelihood that I would see him around. It was a university town, not a big city. I’d bump into him. As it turned out, I didn’t have to wait for chance.

He must have slipped the note into my purse when he said good night. I found it when I got home:

If I had your number, we could talk, and I’d tell you something funny.

He'd written his number at the bottom of the note.

Before going to bed I looked up *cruciverbalist*. I laughed and believed him.

—I still don't understand. How could something like this happen?

—We're all in shock.

—Nothing so horrible has ever happened around here.

—No, not like this.

—In all the years I've worked here.

—I would think not.

—I didn't sleep last night. Not a wink.

—Me neither. Couldn't get comfortable. I can barely eat. You should have seen my wife when I told her. I thought she was going to be sick.

—How could he actually do it, go through with it? You don't do that on a whim. You couldn't.

—It's scary is what it is. Scary and disturbing.

—So did you know him? Were you close, or . . . ?

—No, no. Not close. I don't think anyone was close with him. He was a loner. That was his nature. Kept to himself. Standoffish. Some knew him better. But . . . you know.

—It's crazy. It doesn't seem real.

—It's one of those terrible things, but unfortunately it's very real.

“**H**ow are the roads?”

“Not bad,” he says. “A little slick.”

“Glad it’s not snowing.”

“Hopefully it won’t start.”

“It looks cold out there.”

Individually, we’re both unspectacular. It seems noteworthy. Combining our ingredients, Jake’s lean height with my overt shortness, makes no sense. Alone in a crowd, I feel condensed, *overlook-able*. Jake, despite his height, also blends into a crowd. When we’re together, though, I notice people looking at us. Not at him or at me: at us. Individually, I blend in. So does he. As a couple, we stand out.

Within six days of meeting at the pub, we’d had three proper meals together, gone for two walks, met for coffee, and watched a movie. We talked all the time. We’d been intimate. Jake has told me twice after seeing me naked that I remind him—in a good way, he stressed—of young Uma Thurman, a “compressed” Uma Thurman. He called me “compressed.” That was the word. His word.

He’s never called me sexy. Which is fine. He’s called me pretty and he said “beautiful” once or twice, the way guys do. Once he called me therapeutic. I’d never heard that from anyone before. It was right after we’d fooled around.

I thought it might happen—fooling around—but it wasn’t planned. We’d just started making out on my couch after dinner. I’d made soup. For dessert we were splitting a bottle of gin. We were passing it back and forth, taking swigs right from the bottle like high school kids getting drunk before a dance. This instance felt much more urgent than the other times we’d made

out. When the bottle was half-finished, we moved to the bed. He took off my top, and I unzipped his pants. He let me do what I wanted.

He kept saying, “Kiss me, kiss me.” Even if I stopped for only three seconds. “Kiss me,” again and again. Other than that, he was quiet. The lights were off, and I could barely hear him breathing.

I couldn’t see him very well.

“Let’s use our hands,” he said. “Only our hands.”

I thought we were about to have sex. I didn’t know what to say. I went along with it. I’d never done that before. When we were finished he collapsed on top of me. We stayed like that for a bit, eyes closed, breathing. Then he rolled over and sighed.

I don’t know how long it was after that, but eventually Jake got up and went to the bathroom. I lay there, watching him walk, listening to the tap running. I heard the toilet flush. He was in there for a while. I was looking at my toes, wiggling them.

I was thinking then that I should tell him about the Caller. But I just couldn’t. I wanted to forget about it. Telling him would make it more serious than I wanted it to be. That was the closest I came to telling him.

I was lying there alone when a memory came to mind. When I was very young, maybe six or seven, I woke up one night and saw a man at my window. I hadn’t thought about that in a long time. I don’t often talk—or even think—about it. It’s sort of a nebulous, patchy memory. But the parts I recall, I remember with clarity. This is not a story I offer up at dinner parties. I’m not sure what people would make of it. I’m not sure I know what to make of it myself. I don’t know why it came to mind that night.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN something is menacing? What cues us that something is not innocent? Instinct always trumps reason. At night, when I wake up alone, the memory still terrifies me. It scares me more the older I

get. Each time I remember it, it seems worse, more sinister. Maybe each time I remember it, I make it worse than it was. I don't know.

I woke up for no reason that night. It's not like I had to go to the bathroom. My room was very quiet. There was no coming to. I was immediately wide-awake. This was unusual for me. It always takes me a few seconds, or even minutes, to come to. This time, I woke up like I'd been kicked.

I was lying on my back, which was also unusual. I normally sleep on my side or stomach. The covers were up around me, tight, like I'd just been tucked in. I was hot, sweating. My pillow was moist. My door was closed, and the night-light that I usually left on was off. The room was dark.

The overhead fan was on high. It was spinning fast, I remember that part well. Really spinning. It seemed like it might fly off the ceiling. It was the only sound I could hear—the fan's metronomic motor and blades cutting through the air.

It wasn't a new house, and I could always hear something—pipes, or creaking, something—whenever I woke up in the night. It was strange that I couldn't hear anything else at that moment. I lay there listening, alert, addled.

And that's when I saw him.

My room was at the back of the house. It was the only bedroom on the ground floor. The window was in front of me. It wasn't wide or tall. The man was just standing there. Outside.

I couldn't see his face. It was beyond the window frame. I could see his torso, just half of it. He was swaying slightly. His hands were moving, rubbing each other from time to time, as if he was trying to warm them. I remember that vividly. He was very tall, very skinny. His belt—I remember his worn black belt—was fastened so that the excess part hung down like a tail in the front. He was taller than anyone I'd ever seen.

For a long time I watched him. I didn't move. He stayed where he was, too, right up against the window, his hands still moving over each other. He looked like he was taking a break from some kind of physical work.

But the longer I watched him, the more it seemed—or felt—like he could see me, even with his head and eyes above the top of the window. It didn't make sense. None of it did. If I couldn't see his eyes, how could he see me? I knew it wasn't a dream. It wasn't *not* a dream, either. He was watching me. That's why he was there.

Soft music played, from outside, but I can't remember it clearly. I could barely hear it. And it wasn't noticeable when I first woke up. But I came to hear it after seeing the man. I'm not sure if it was recorded music or humming. A long time elapsed this way, I think, many minutes, maybe an hour.

And then the man waved. I wasn't expecting it. I honestly don't know if it was definitely a wave or a movement of his hand. Maybe it was just a wavelike gesture.

The wave changed everything. It had an effect of malice, as if he were suggesting I could never be completely on my own, that he would be around, that he would be back. I was suddenly afraid. The thing is, that feeling is just as real to me now as it was then. The visuals are just as real.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to call out but didn't. I fell asleep. When I finally opened my eyes, it was morning. And the man was gone.

After that, I thought it would reoccur. That he would appear again, watching. But it didn't. Not at my window, anyhow.

But I always felt like the man was there. The man is always there.

THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES I think I saw him. I'd pass a window, usually at night, and there'd be a tall man sitting with his legs crossed outside my house on the bench. He was still and looking my way. I'm not sure how a man sitting on a bench is pernicious, but he was.

He was far enough away that it was hard to see his face or know for sure if he was looking at me. I hated when I saw him. It didn't happen often. But I hated it. There was nothing I could do about it. He wasn't doing anything

wrong. But he also wasn't doing anything at all. Not reading. Not talking. Just sitting there. Why was he there? That was probably the worst part. It may have all been in my head. These kinds of abstractions can seem most real.

I was lying on my back, as Jake had left me, when he returned from the bathroom. The covers were messed up. One of the pillows was on the floor. The way our clothes lay in messy heaps around the bed made the room look like a crime scene.

He stood at the foot of the bed without saying anything for what felt like an unnaturally long time. I'd seen him lying down naked but never standing. I pretended not to look. His body was pale, lean, and veiny. He found his underwear on the floor, pulled them on, and climbed back into bed.

"I want to stay here tonight," he said. "This is so nice. I don't want to leave you."

For some reason, right at that moment, as he slid up next to me, his foot rubbing up against mine, I wanted to make him jealous. I'd never felt such a strong urge before. It arrived out of nowhere.

I glanced at him beside me, lying on his stomach, his eyes closed. We both had sweaty hair. His face, like mine, was flushed.

"That was so nice," I said, tickling his lower back with the tips of my fingers. He moaned in agreement. "My last boyfriend . . . there was no . . . a real connection is rare. Some relationships are all physical, only physical. It's an extreme physical release and nothing more. You might be all over each other, but that kind of thing doesn't last."

I still don't know why I said it. It wasn't entirely true, and why would I bring up another boyfriend in that moment? Jake didn't react. Not at all. He just lay there, turned on his side to face me, and said, "Keep doing that. It feels good. I like when you touch me. You're very tender. You're therapeutic."

"You feel good, too," I said.

Five minutes later, Jake's breathing changed. He'd fallen asleep. I was hot and kept the covers off me. The room was dark, but my eyes had adjusted; I could still see my toes. I heard my phone ring in the kitchen. It was really

late. Too late for anyone to be calling. I didn't get up to answer it. I couldn't fall asleep. I tossed and turned. It rang three more times. We stayed in bed.

When I woke up in the morning, later than usual, Jake was gone. I was under the covers. I had a headache and a dry mouth. The bottle of gin was on the floor, empty. I was wearing underwear and a tank top but had no memory of ever putting them on.

I should have told Jake about the Caller. I realize that now. It's something I should have told him about when it started. I should have told *someone*. But I didn't. I didn't think it was anything significant until it was. Now I know better.

The first time he called, it was just a wrong number. That's all. Nothing serious. Nothing to be worried about. That call came the same night I met Jake at the pub. Wrong numbers don't happen often, but they aren't unheard of. The call woke me from a deep sleep. The only strange part was the Caller's voice—a strained timbre and subdued, gradual delivery.

Right from the start, from that first week with Jake, even from the first date, I noticed odd little things about him. I don't like that I notice these things. But I do. Even now, in the car. I notice his smell. It's subtle. But in this enclosed space, it's there. It's not bad. I don't know how to describe it. It's just Jake's smell. So many small details that we learn in such short periods of time. It's been weeks, not years. There are obviously things I don't know about him. And there are things he doesn't know about me. Like the Caller.

The Caller was a man, I could hear that, middle-aged at least, probably older, but with a distinctly feminine voice, almost as if he was putting on a flat female intonation, or at least making his voice higher pitched, more delicate. It was unpleasantly distorted. It was a voice I didn't recognize. It wasn't someone I knew.

For a long time, I listened to that first message over and over, seeing if I could detect anything familiar. I couldn't. I still can't.

After that first call, when I explained to the Caller that it must be a wrong number, he said, "I'm sorry," in his scratchy, effeminate voice. He waited for