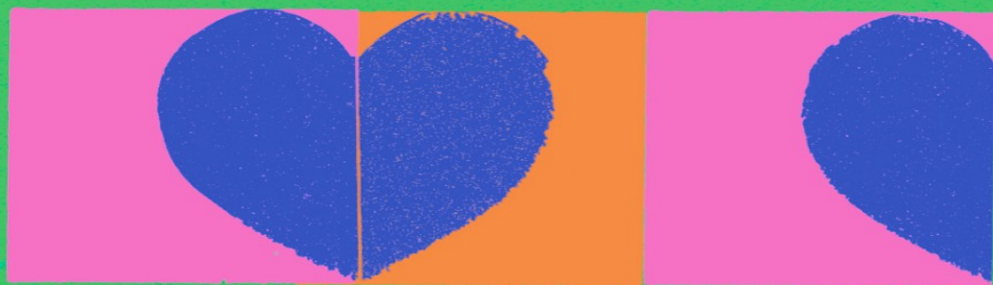


**MAGGIE
OR, A MAN
AND A
WOMAN
WALK INTO
A BAR**

"A story as playful as it is profound."
—ALISON ESPACH,
author of *The Wedding People*



KATIE YEE

A NOVEL

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Maggie; or, A Man and a Woman Walk Into a Bar

Katie Yee

Summit Books

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI

*For my family. Thanks for not laughing at me when I said I was going to study
English.*

Especially for my mom, from whom I inherited a love of stories.

I was folding linens when I first found out my children don't think I'm funny. I was by the hall closet, overhearing them asking my husband for a bedtime story. This was after I'd already read them *Where the Wild Things Are*, a book they used to love so much the pages were starting to pull from their binding. He reminded them of this. A good husband. And they told him, "You'd tell it better." And so he did. A better father.

The thing I noticed that was peculiar about my husband's telling was that the characters are all out of sorts. Max doesn't sail away from his room in the usual boat. A bald boy named Harold shows up, paddling past in an ill-drawn dinghy, clutching a purple crayon. As my husband tells it, they sail off together but lose their way. They float for what feels like days, until they happen upon an island they come to know as Neverland, where a ragtag gang of boys their age pulls them in. They were Lost Boys all along. Go figure.

It became a bad habit. I'd read them their story, kiss their sweaty foreheads, try not to step on Lincoln Logs on the way out. I'd tread downstairs, begin to soak the pots and pans, and then I'd stand in the hall, at the bottom of the staircase, listening to them beg my husband for a better story. It was a small betrayal. Night after night, he'd pluck a character from one book and drop it into another. The mismatched-ness made them laugh. It's unexpected; it's not right. That's what makes it fun. Little Red Riding Hood turning up at her grandmother's house only to find, not Grandma, not the Wolf, no, but Sleeping Beauty instead.

And my kids are in fits over it.

It hurts in an unexpected way, like doing yoga for the first time in a long while and realizing you can't bend the way you thought you could; a new soreness.



We knew our children would look more like me, by the basic rules of genetics. In the world of procreation and Punnett squares, our bodies were not on equal footing. I possess the dominant traits: black hair, brown eyes, skin with warm undertones. For

weeks of the babies' development, I imagined my genes looming large over his in the egg, devouring them. Something in it felt greedy. Also, powerful.

Sam has brown-blond hair, green eyes, and skin that loosely resembles pale shrimp gaining pink over the stove. He's tall, a whole head taller than me, with an effortlessly trim frame. It did make me sad to think of these traits, lost. The things that drew me to him initially.

After one doctor's appointment, after my husband went to bed, I studied my face in the mirror. Really studied. A widow's peak at the hairline, faint eyebrows, a nonexistent nose bridge, sparse eyelashes—the hair perhaps relocated to my knuckles, which I stacked rings on top of, every morning.

Other things that are inherited: a hitchhiker's thumb, the ability to touch tongue to nose, the willingness of your fingers to split into the “live long and prosper” signal.

I have on good authority (an OB nurse holding court at a friend's holiday party) that when they are born, children most resemble the father. They have evolved to do so, so the dad will recognize himself in his offspring—and not think them the product of a torrid affair. Even the evolution of newborns assumes a world rife with infidelity. Even babies know to appease the patriarch, to make it known that they are his.



I'm at the bookstore with my best friend, Darlene. She's picking up Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* to impress someone she likes. I think of early days, of the effort you make just to show someone you're interested.

By the register, there are all these little tchotchke gifts for people you don't know well. The desk calendars shine with their plastic, and their promise of twelve inoffensive whales, or national parks, or what have you. There are also books on a spinning rack: *The Little Book of Buddhism*, *Love Poems*, *Fun Facts About Birds*, and *A Beginner's Guide to Paris*. Then there it is: *The Big Book of Anti-Jokes*.

Darlene thinks I'm being dramatic when I tell her about the kids not finding me funny anymore. It's usually her job to talk me down from these things, to stop my little spirals. “They used to find me hilarious,” I protest to her. I try to balance *The Big Book of*

Anti-Jokes on my head. “Remember *Is This a Hat?* They loved that one.” (Darlene hated that one, how many hours spent asking the same question.) Let me tell you something: children are tickled by wrongness. Or maybe they just love knowing something you don’t.

I tell her the anti-joke book is for me, not them, and it turns into an anti-lie. I keep it, and then I just keep keeping it. The jokes are like flat soda. The punch lines are more like weak kicks in areas you don’t expect, that don’t even hurt. The jokes make no sense. Rather, they make a little too much sense. The anti-jokes pare all the theatrics of jokes down to naked logic. (What do you call a joke that isn’t funny? A sentence. Want to hear something that’ll make you smile? Your face muscles.) I find myself reading them after everyone else has turned in for the night. Sometimes, I think to text one or two to Darlene, or even to my husband upstairs, but I don’t think they’ll truly appreciate them. I rifle through the pages quiet as I can and feel like a kid unwrapping candy, sneaking just one or two more in before bed.



Sometimes I dream of being a children’s book author. I can picture my byline on the glossy cover. All the kids will put their sticky hands on my name but never say it out loud. (This is okay. I find comfort in this, actually: a near-anonymous dependability.)

I would write down all the stories that used to delight my kids—some of which we made up together. They might not love hearing them forever, but I could store them in the pages of my children’s book for safekeeping. I would write down all the stories I dream up that I’m too afraid to tell them. (Your most cutting critics are always your children.)

I would write from the perspective of Darlene’s dog, Roberta, who believes, whenever it rains, that her human has mistakenly opened up the wrong door into another reality; I would write about a peculiar store that sells sleep by the inch, happiness by the pound, wisdom in spools, and love in degrees; I would write about Harold the Elephant, whose job it is to sit in uncomfortable silence among humans whenever something isn’t being said, whose job it was to be the literal elephant in the room. Then Harold would go home

to his elephant family, from whom he was keeping a secret of his own, and there would be a human in the room.

I read a rather demoralizing study that said that in one year, they surveyed all the children's books published in the US. Here's what they found: Roughly half the books published centered white characters. Also: more books were published starring animals or inanimate objects than all the books about people of color combined.

"So, fix it! Write this down!" Darlene, indignant, says when I tell her this. Her excitement fuels me, and I sit down to write and—nothing.

Truthfully, I'm not sure how to tell people my stories yet. The characters in my own family are starting to feel so opaque to me; it seems like an awful lot of effort to create new life and to get to know them, too. Besides, I'm reluctant to pluck my own flesh and blood and place them there, in my stories. I don't want to spin them into something against their will. I want them to live fully off the page, no shadow wet with my ink following them around.

■

There was a loud baby on my first date with my husband. At a trendy Asian fusion restaurant, in the booth behind ours. I said something about myself, and the baby cried. "Baby doesn't like that," he joked, and the baby behind us became a barometer for how well things were going.

Sam chose this restaurant because it was very vegetarian-friendly. "Not because I'm Asian," I had clarified, teasing him. "Of course not," he'd said. I was adamantly vegetarian in those days. Sam even converted for the first several years of our dating life and subsequent marriage, falling into the soft pillow of my habits. On our wedding day, he couldn't resist the siren sound of "Chicken or beef?" and caved once, and okay, sometimes on special occasions. ("Bacon doesn't count on birthdays, right?") But the years since have turned him back into a carnivore, someone who devours the flesh of weaker animals.

■

When you first start dating someone, early communication is communal. Everybody knows that. When you're texting a woman, it's incredibly probable that you're talking not just to her but to one or two of her closest friends as well. You need a group consensus.

When we first started dating, eventually Sam caught on to this and sent a message that went something like, "Hello, ladies." Ladies? "Ladies?" I had replied. "Yeah, since you're going to show this to Darlene anyway," he joked.

At the wedding, Darlene joked that she had courtship-side seats.



At night, I can hear my husband spinning new stories for the kids, really selling them on it. The Tortoise and the Hare are in a race, but it's the Big Bad Wolf who wins in the end.

The children protest. How can this be? They demand to know. "I thought slow and steady won the race," my son, the skeptic, says. I hear the creak of bedsprings, my husband shifting his weight.

There's a small reading lamp on the nightstand between their twin beds. It's like a gold orb with lots of tiny dots poked into it, from which the light shines out. From my perch in the hallway, with their door open, I can see their blurry shadows. I learn to tell the difference: my daughter, Lily, trying hard not to fall asleep, the gentle sway of slumber cast over her; Noah, my son, leaning intently forward, toward the story. My husband's shadow looms so large over theirs. Some evenings, if they're slumped close together, his shadow completely consumes theirs, and it's like they are one cohesive thing.

My voyeuristic obsession reminds me of the allegory of the cave. Prisoners facing a wall, doomed to watch the puppet show of life play out in front of them. How different reality is from here. How stubborn we are not to see what's lurking, right behind us.

My husband clears his throat and tells them, "Can't you see? It's really a good thing he won the race that day. It means he wasn't there to huff and puff and blow those nice pigs' house down."



A man and a woman walk into a bar. It sounds like the start of a very old joke, and it is. It is also the start of an affair.



When my husband told me about Maggie, we were out, kidless, at a nice Indian restaurant. I should have known something was up. But the restaurant we were at was actually an all-you-can-eat buffet, so one can imagine the excitement that blinded me.

The plates they give you at those things are never as large as you want them to be. They trust that you will not want to get up and down and pace around the buffet table so much, but I requested we get the table right in front of it. “So we’ll see when they replenish the samosas,” I said to my husband, who simply shook his head but sat down across from me, the way he always had.

He laid the red linen napkin across his lap, which reminded me to do the same. My husband, always the man with good manners. (When we first moved in together, with no furniture to speak of, we sat on the hardwood floor and ordered Papa John’s. I remember he laid a tiny paper napkin across his knee with a great flourish that night, and I remember remembering that moment at the restaurant. Funny, isn’t it? The things that stick.)

The first part of the evening was marvelous. An all-you-can-eat buffet! A place of possibility. I gorged on garlic naan and saag paneer. We drank creamy mango lassis out of stout goblets.

Having the table near the buffet meant we got a lot of foot traffic. This, of course, made it incredibly awkward when my husband finally said what it was that he wanted to say. I remember thinking he had been eyeing the buffet line with a rare intensity all evening. At first, I thought he was just eager to get his second fill when the line was shortest. In hindsight, I think he was timing it such that no one would be within earshot when he said it.

I had been in a good mood that day, on account of the surprise fancy dinner. (“Don’t get too excited. It’s really not *that* nice,” Sam had said when I was opening the door and making little exclamations of joy. When I was growing up, my family didn’t eat out at

restaurants much, and there are some things you never grow out of.) I was yammering on about some gossip from the PTA, a very minor treasury scandal that isn't worth dwelling on. Then I guess my husband saw his moment—a clearing of the cars, a log to float on—and said it. Four little words. “I’m having an affair.”

Honestly, my first inclination was to laugh. Not because what he said was funny at all, no, but because his confession was just so surprising. It’s been my experience that when you’re confronted with something you don’t know what to do with, the human body sort of just naturally, nervously, guffaws. I thought, surely it was part of a joke I wasn’t quite getting. One of Sam’s bits. Sometimes he says totally random things just to see if people are listening, like a mic check. He just wants a reaction out of you. Like the mix-and-match game he played with the kids at bedtime, only with higher stakes. Risky. A bad punch line. *I’m having an affair*. Just like that. A punch to the gut.

I watched his face for signs of a joke: the curl of a smile tugging at his lips, but his mouth stayed in that same sharp line. Could a mouth be so piercing?

It was the floor giving out. The Wolf after all. (When I would tell this story over and over again to Darlene—a way to process—we would take to calling it “a total naan-sequitur.”)

In romance movies, when you meet the person you’re supposed to be with, time parts. It has a way of happening around the two lovers. In action films, when someone dies, there is that similar slowing down. Time bends for those on the precipice.

Anyway, *I’m having an affair*. Sam’s words hung solidly in the air. They didn’t dissipate like some phrases (“love you” after the “I” has been dropped). That night, time stretched to accommodate my delay in response.

The natural first question: Who is she? They say that the human brain is incapable of creating faces. This means that every stranger you encounter in a dream is, in fact, someone who exists in real life. In this waking nightmare, it was the same. It was someone I knew, surely. Someone I had seen, even in passing: a perky assistant at work; one of his more serious ex-girlfriends crawling out of the woodwork after all this time; a woman in a beige raincoat waiting for the bus; a very fit runner with a sleek ponytail jogging next to him in the early morning; our favorite barista, who hands us our large drip coffees every morning but only charges us for smalls.

Prolonged eye contact; beating around the bush; the electricity of a carefully planned casual touch to the arm; sharing a HuffPost article because it reminded you; a totally innocent and coincidental run-in at a coffee shop on the other side of town; splitting a pastry; the way the possibility of a missed text message can burn a hole in your pocket; the siren glow of a phone screen in the middle of the night; “I was just thinking about you”; the intensity of a long-delayed first kiss; teasing photos; dinner at her place, cold plates, candles, sinking into the couch like a slow and willful slide into the mud; deleted text messages (on his end—whoever she is, I’m sure she’s kept it all).

In the wickedness of my imagination, even in that split second, from the depths of my subconscious, I pictured her as a white woman. Pretty. Dirty blond. They could be siblings. That type of thing. Even in that blink of a moment, I somehow knew. Conjured up this person who looked like she fit a little better next to Sam.

I replayed all our interactions of the past few months. Counted the number of nights he was late coming in from the office—the way I pitied him and said he should stop working so hard, heated his dinner and hung up his coat, the pockets of which were probably still warm from some other woman’s touch. Counted the number of times I woke up with his back to me, his phone screen obscured, and I had assumed it was merely another news alert from the *New York Times* informing us of bombs dropping somewhere else.

They weren’t so much concrete thoughts or fully formed sentences as they were quick emotions and scenarios I was moving through. I almost have to hand it to my imagination for the speed with which it could create a dozen vignettes: images (lives, love stories) flickering through my mind like the flame from the tea candle on the table.

And then the second wave hit me, and I felt guilty about my own reaction. His admission made me feel like we were in the earlier days of our dating life somehow. Brought forth *wife* and *partner* instead of *mother*. The family fell away for just a second. We weren’t one unit any longer. Something about his having an affair made it between me and him in a way things hadn’t been for a while. For just a second, in this conversation, the years shrank down and the betrayal was to some younger version of myself: a girl on a first date, a girl at her wedding, a girl with a broken heart. Deer—headlights.

Not wanting to look at him, I kept my eyes trained on the buffet table instead. A man was emptying an entire tray of samosas onto the platter. The steam that rose out of them smelled heavenly.

I'm having an affair—like it's something you possess and not something you've done. Like, *I'm having highlights done next week*. Like, *I'm having lamb over rice*.

"I'm having seconds," I said, and abruptly stood up, my napkin falling to the floor. I piled the samosas up high on my plate. I ate them all, and we didn't say anything more. The whole rest of that meal, I remember, Sam kept his gaze firmly fixed on me. You could've warmed my plate with the heat of his stare.

It reminded me of that advice about being robbed or held up at gunpoint. You're supposed to make as much eye contact with your villain as possible, to solidify your humanness. It was like Sam was trying to telepath to me some proof of his humanity.

A man and a different woman walk into a restaurant, and it sounds like the start of a very old joke, and it is. It is also the end of a marriage.

■

My husband has no obsessions. He's not a hobbyist or a tinkerer. He doesn't dabble. We tried roller-skating on an early date and left after he fell down once; he gives the impression of a man in control of his time because he doesn't bother with things he's not good at. He doesn't like working toward something. It's in these ways you can tell he was the golden boy growing up. The smooth finish of an easy life. A life without turbulence.

He became a headhunter because he's good at talking people into things, selling them on some other way their life could be. If this were one of his fairy tales, my husband would be a mysterious merchant, a stranger blowing through town on the wind. He would have a small burlap satchel that he would never let go of. He would arrive in a place and go door-to-door and sell mortals another life that could be theirs. His powers would hinge on the irresistibility of snow not trodden on—all the paths you've never walked down. And if you don't read the fine print, he'll make off with your children.

My children, of course, find my husband's job funny. They tell their friends in hushed tones that their father is a "head hunter" when they come over, as they are removing their

sneakers by the front door. If their friends sleep over that night, I notice they pull the sheets up a little higher around their cheeks, like a shield. The kids think it's fun to lord their dad's perceived power over people like this.

What my husband being a headhunter actually means, of course, is that he is always looking for the best person for the job. He knows what to offer to get someone's attention. And he has to sacrifice very little in the end. The choices don't affect his day-to-day living very much.



Once, in my early twenties, I got this little compact mirror that I kept in my purse. I loved it—carried it with me everywhere—but I didn't use it very often. One day, it shattered, only I didn't realize it. For weeks, I would stick my hand in my bag and come up cut and not know why. When I think of the night Sam told me about Maggie, it feels like that.

Everyone says bad things happen in a blur, but I remember the rest of that evening sharply.

At the all-you-can-eat restaurant: I finished my second plate. Sam pushed cubes of paneer around with his fork, trying to catch my eye. I can still hear the specific and grating scrape of his fork on those sturdy off-white plates. When the check came, Sam signed it. Then out came two tiny scoops of mango rice pudding. My husband removed the spoon that was supposed to be his from the rim, and gestured for me to take the whole thing, which I did; it was delicious, the best rice pudding I've had to this day. How do you like that?

On the way home: the train was delayed. Fourteen minutes away, according to the announcements board, which might as well have said an eternity. "Do you want to just take a cab?" my husband asked, somewhere just behind me and to the left. I shook my head, resigned to the underground, to the waiting. *What am I rushing toward anyway?* There was a young couple—high school—making out on the platform. They had an impressive height difference between them, and backpacks. They did not look popular, which made me hope they were happy. *Don't spend it all in one place*, I telepathed to them. Seventeen minutes later, a rat ran valiantly over a medium-sized UA Theater soda

cup in the tracks, just before our chariot arrived, and I found myself rooting for it. Wanting to root for life.

The train: was empty enough that we could sit together but didn't have to. We did anyway, in one of those love seats by the window, cramped. It reminded me of the first date, how under the table, you might lean a knee daringly toward the other person. We both winced when the train's turbulence pushed us toward one another. Sam put his feet up on the seat in front of us, and I noticed for the first time the way they maybe didn't quite fit; the way the edges of his leather shoes were worn thin and light from the friction of his step.

Every few stops, my curiosity got the better of me, and I broke my pseudo-silent treatment. I asked the requisite questions: who, what, when, etc. *Who* first because I needed another villain, one I wasn't married to. Who is she? How did you meet? (How did this happen?) And then the train would rumble over the tracks. The closer we got to home, the harder the questions got. But I held on to *why*. I thought I knew the answer to this one: he had simply met someone better. In truth, I think I had always felt a tad inferior to Sam. The lack of my *why* made this clear. Besides, the other questions were more fact-based, whereas *why* tiptoed into an emotional realm I wasn't quite ready for. It required more personal excavation. I could be roped into the *why*. The interrogation lamp would turn to shine on our marriage and its failures in his eyes. I didn't want to see what came to light. Instead, I asked: Have you slept with her? (Is she better in bed?) Do you love her? (Do you love her more than you love me?)

A resolute "yes" to the questions I asked answered the questions I didn't.

Approaching the front door: I got my keys out first. Like so many women, I'm used to walking with them in between my fingers at night. I fumbled with the lock because it sticks at inconvenient times, and then I let us both in, and it is not a metaphor for anything. It's not a metaphor, not a blur, I remember it all so crystal clear.

Like a superhero or a big cat with good reflexes, I swear my senses were heightened that evening. I remember every detail in an attempt to—what?

We got home, and home felt different. Smaller. Like somebody who is very good with pranks got a contractor to shrink every room by eleven inches, give or take. Like maybe the prankster and the contractor put up a second wall, see, so everything comes in just a touch closer.

Coming home was like being jolted from a dream, jarred into a small and insignificant life. Tinged with embarrassment, too. That shine I thought my life had? Fool's gold after all. The way you can tell the difference: when pressure is applied to the surface, real gold will indent (receptive to impression, to being sculpted), whereas fool's gold will merely flake and crumble.

Barring that, everything was exactly as I had left it, and that somehow made everything worse. The seltzer can I had placed on the kitchen counter on my way out with three or four little sips inside—I drank from it, suddenly parched, when we returned, the bubbles flat. The fizz out of life.

Like coming back from a glamorous vacation and having the jolting realization that—surprise!—you live in filth. The piles of kids' laundry hiding behind doors. The minuscule splatters on the stove that you always mean to get out but never do. The way enough stray hairs find each other in the corners of rooms and accumulate their own personhood.

I noticed our mess with the eyes of a stranger, of someone coming into our home for the first time. I looked at our home the way she might have seen it. I saw the streaks on the windows and the overflowing kitchen trash can, the balled-up fleece blankets on the couch. Shoes at the entryway, kicked this way and that. I saw all the little lived-in flaws, the way you might be passingly critical of these things in someone else's home, or a hotel room. When you see a few stray hairs in the bathroom sink of an Airbnb, you think that's disgusting, but when they're from your own head, you think nothing of it. Maybe that's what it is. Every stray hair now felt like an encroachment.

Had she been here at all? Maybe when I was shuffling the kids to birthday parties and making small talk with the other parents, comparing notes on the new second-grade teacher over ice cream cake? Maybe when I was taking the kids for checkups, which we tried to stack onto one day a year: Pit Crew Day? Perhaps when we were going to the movies with Darlene, but Sam had to back out at the last second for some transatlantic call that his assistant messed up the time zones for?

Had she seen the house in this state and loved him still? Did she take one look around and judge my housekeeping? Did she say to herself: *No wonder why. She can't even keep her own home in order?* Did she think, maybe, just to make herself feel better, that the state of our home was a reflection on the state of our marriage? I hadn't thought it was so

dire. Maybe just a tad neglected. Sure, the recycling was overflowing and there were garbage bags of outgrown clothes to be donated in the front hallway, but our intentions were so good!

All the grime stuck with me and I did not bother washing it off. I wanted to remember it all. About this, I wonder: Why?

To keep this story from tumbling away from me, maybe, out of control, out of my grasp. I dug the talons of my memory deep into that night, and I didn't let go for a very long time.

The kids' sneakers and socks kicked off exactly where they stood when they got home; the throw pillow basically still holding Noah's shape from where he fell asleep on the couch earlier that afternoon. I looked around at our family mess, with less criticism and with more love. Already longing for the way we lived like this.



The night he tells me about Maggie is the first night when I dream of being alone in my house. It's a dream I will have over and over with no variation, but this night, I'm sure, is the first time I dream it. It's dark. There's a *knock-knock* at the door. ("Definitely the result of too many of those jokes before bed," Darlene chastises me when I tell the story later.)

In the dream, I'm in the middle of something, and I can never remember what it is by the time I wake up. All I know is that I'm reluctant to get the door. I think of the things that typically come knocking: opportunity, or death. Witches with baskets of apples. Mean wolves with hardy lungs.

"Who's there?" I ask, in every dream. The question, a line of defense. The joke relies on the natural human instinct to want to know who is on the other side of the door. Your identity becomes the password that way.

When I finally turn the knob and swing back the door, there is no one there.



By the time I wake up the next morning, Sam is already dressed for work. He's wearing a very handsome navy-blue suit, one I picked out with him years ago to celebrate a promotion at work. It's early—not even six a.m. He spent the night on the couch. It wasn't something we discussed; he just surrendered himself to it like a martyr. When we got to the house, he simply said, "I'll give you some time to process," and dismissed himself. It was late. I didn't have it in me to pick a fight anyway. When I wake, it's to the sound of his weekend duffel bag being zipped up. Such a final sound.

"I think I'm going to stay at my parents' house for a while," he ventures quietly. "And then we can sort everything out."

Sam's parents live in this enormous house in Oyster Bay, about an hour's drive away. Well, *live* is maybe not the right word. They own several properties, this house among them. His family is the kind of generous that means always letting people stay in their houses, but only when they aren't around. This was maybe the first time I looked at Sam and saw empty houses, too.

Whenever we would stay in this version of their home, we would drive up and all the blinds would be shut. The lights off. The heat off. Severe. Because Sam's parents liked to bounce around a lot, they didn't bother with plants. Their homes were devoid of life in every way.

When we first started driving up there on a few odd weekends of the year, the kids were initially afraid of the house. We'd usually depart on a Friday, whenever Sam could get away from work, which is to say it was usually dark—the sun having slipped away, abandoning us before our arrival. We'd park the car, and Noah would just start wailing, which made Lily cry, too. The four of us, sitting in our little Subaru, with this big, intimidating house before us. "It's haunted!" Noah would cry and cry. He hated opening doors. He refused to pull back the shower curtain in the bathroom by himself, unsure of what he might find. Lily feared the dark space under her bed, conjured up all sorts of evils that might make their home there. Don't even get them started on the stairs to the basement and the ladder to the attic!

But one day, to ward off the ghosts and whatever else had settled there, I came up with this silly ritual for us. I would arm the children with their own little camping lanterns. This part was important, that the lanterns belonged to them. They got to choose the ones they wanted. My kids would go forward with unborrowed light. I would put on

Toploader's "Dancing in the Moonlight." Really blast it from the car speakers. I feel it is scientifically impossible to be upset or mad or afraid when this song is playing. (Also, it was Sam's and my wedding song. Something we played often in our own home, and that familiarity gave them added comfort.)

We made a game of it. They would run through the house with this song blasting, and they would flip every switch they could find. Sam and I would stand outside on the porch and watch the warmth spread room by room, as if by magic. We would watch our kids flood the space with light and life. And by the time the song was over, all the lights would be on, and the kids and Sam and I would be singing the last of the lyrics in the foyer under the crystal chandelier, awash in its glow. Whispering the last of the song as it faded out into the normalcy of the rest of our night.

And now it seemed incredibly likely that we wouldn't be doing that again, ever.

Instead: Sam would drive up to that big, imposing house alone. Would our song play somewhere in the back of his mind? Or, no—would he be there with her? Tonight, would they pull up together with some totally different and new song on the radio? Would they have spent the drive dreaming about their future together and meaning it this time? That's the way it is with new love: pulling your dreams from the clouds and laying them out before you like brickwork. Assuming they'll be solid enough to hold you. Isn't it funny—when we think of dreams, we think ethereal. Lofty. Gauzy even. And it's true: when it was me and Sam in that car at the very beginning, my wants were all so airy and unspecific. I wanted to be loved. I wanted a nice life. And I wanted it with Sam, plain and simple. Would he lead her into the guest bedroom where we always stayed? (Maybe I always felt like a guest in that house. Maybe his family always saw me as a transient person, a way station for their Sam.) My dreams are so heavy now. When did that happen? Maybe it's something that comes with age. Or family.

Our house is already starting to feel like Sam's parents' house on the beach when you approach it at night. When I hear Sam shut the front door and drive away, I close my eyes, and I understand better what Noah and Lily were feeling when they looked into the soulless house that was not a home. You're never too old to be afraid of what you can't see. How scary it is to be in the dark of things.

Darlene and I are separated by a thirty-two-minute walk that encompasses part of our local park: a few miles of greenery to make you forget you live in a congested metropolis. I come to the park to participate in the shared delusion of calm, of life somewhere else, and sometimes it works! After muttering a meek explanation about their father's sudden "business-related" departure and walking them to school, I embark on my tiny odyssey and pray for a poetic rain. Something to make everyone miserable with me, or at the very least to keep my few escaped tears company. It's a beautiful spring day. How wildly disjointed it is when the sun on your skin feels like it's mocking you.

I tell Darlene that I need to come over but not why. It feels like the kind of news best delivered in person. Still, I dial her number as I weave my way through late-morning commuters and semipro cyclists.

Even over the phone, I can feel everything in her trying not to ask me what is going on. We dance around the proverbial elephant. I ask about her life: attentive questions regarding her dog's progress on "paw" and "other paw." (No progress to speak of; thank you for asking.) I ask about updates on that one new coworker she has been having problems with (still an asshole) and about how her date went the other night (an asshole, as of recently). It's not like I don't want to check in. I just know that once I get to her, I'll need the full floor.

Darlene and I had the good fortune of being matched up as college roommates. We joked that it was kind of racist that they paired us together, being two of the few non-white people on our liberal arts campus. We had nothing in common, aside from maybe a baseline of understanding born from our shared exclusion.

When we first met, Darlene was hanging up a poster of *The Silence of the Lambs* in our dorm room. She binged horror movies and wore her love of them like a badge of honor; I couldn't even sit through the previews for them in theaters. She tolerated men; I chased them with abandon. I read books; she read music. She smoked cigarettes, drank vodka without mixers, gave me antacid before nights out so I wouldn't turn red after one drink, and taught me how to dance one night by telling me to write my name in the air with my hips. I once walked in on her getting a stick-and-poke tattoo from our R.A. Me? I only drank Mike's Hard Lemonade at the time, and the truth is I'd never done a risky thing in