

THEY SAY YOU CAN'T GET FAT ON LOVE

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the fifteen-year-old version of myself, who was regularly grounded from everything except books and a typewriter. She wanted to be a writer and wrote terrible stories about her tortured, half-lived life. Today, I hope I've done her justice by revisiting this long-suppressed passion with more life experience and seasoning.

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ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of fictitious short stories that challenge commonly-held biases by highlighting the harsh, abrupt crises that occur when characters learn what they believe to be true is erroneous. The creation of these individual worlds emphasizes the characters' history, worldview, and indoctrination. This work aims to present a dilemma, or a type of mirror, in which a reader might see themselves. These tales do not attempt to provide a moral answer, nor do they make judgments against those characters that hold certain biases. Instead, these stories are a catalyst for questioning beliefs by considering their developmental roots.

I. PROLOGUE

On the first day of the 2020 New Year, after posting something ridiculously optimistic on Instagram, I perused Facebook to witness the celebrations carried out by my nearest and dearest. Also in the mix, the celebrations by a long list of people I kind-of-knew, and finally, those I barely knew. At some point, I stumbled upon the group *Ancient Memes*, cleverly named, because they specialize in niche historical memes. One post, in particular, made me chuckle. The meme consisted of three images of pestilence with the following captions: 1720s Plague, 1820s Cholera Outbreak, 1920s Spanish Flu, 2020 Happy New Year!—question mark? At the time, the correlation struck me as funny, and I even brought it up in conversations later, expressing how clever the meme was. The year 2020 was going to be a great one for me. I had just been awarded the Benjamin A. Gilman International scholarship and arranged two study abroad programs in Italy, one for language and one for archaeology. Everything felt surreally on track.

Then came what felt like the Ides of March, as whispers of a new mysterious airborne pathogen slowly infiltrated my newsfeed. Having studied pathogens early in my undergraduate career, and Spanish influenza, in particular, I started experiencing a deep foreboding in my stomach. If historical precedence served as an example, this mysterious airborne pathogen could be the one thing to derail my plans. America, in general, did not have a good track record in pandemic management. The nagging in my gut would turn out to be right. My study abroad programs in Italy were canceled, my classes soon transitioned to online, and the world went into a chaotic tailspin as expected.

Like everyone else, I was not exactly prepared emotionally for the onslaught of events that would come. You always sort of hope the human species will rally when it

matters most—it happens in movies all the time. A crisis ensues, someone gives an inspiring speech, and everyone cares for their brethren. It’s the American dream we’ve been told—the sacrifice of World War II’s best generation—the united rebellion of the Revolutionary War. Perhaps this dream of America, this historical narrative, is why I was unprepared for housewives fighting over the last package of toilet paper on primarily empty shelves. Or the squabbling of politicians over ensuring ordinary citizens have access to food and shelter as businesses shutter.

Then, George Floyd is murdered on camera by a person who takes an oath to serve and protect. I felt transported back to 1992 when I first watched the Rodney King riots on television at eleven years old. The culmination of these events created in me a state of anxiety-driven insomnia. Each night, I lay awake watching newsreels of pandemic updates on every channel, interspersed between live-feeds of worldwide Black Lives Matter protests. My skin was crawling with a discomfort I could not get rid of, and the questions kept coming. How did we get here? Why is this happening again? How can we still be so divided during this time of devastation? While hundreds were dying daily, hateful comments filled my screen. What I was searching for was empathy, and I was struggling to find it.

I suddenly felt the need to examine my own behavior. Am I an ally? Do I hold biases? If I do, how do I question and challenge them? How do I even recognize them? Old experiences and memories started to fill my mind on anxiety-filled nights. From these thoughts, characters, settings, stories, and scenarios began formulating. I always had a strong imagination as a kid; my parents even tested me for epileptic seizures during grade school because I daydreamed so hard. Suddenly, I felt like this younger version of

myself, seeing the world through new eyes. Everything felt like I had been blindly existing without really seeing. For the first time, in a long time, I felt deeply compelled to write. I decided if I can't find empathy, maybe it was in me to create it.

I needed to get these stories out. This collection is the result of that need. The following fictitious stories seek to be the embodiment of my questions. In them, I explore experiences I've had, things I've seen or heard, where I could have been brave and spoke up in defense of something but pushed the events aside in the act of self-preservation. The common thread of these stories is to challenge commonly-held biases by highlighting the harsh, abrupt crises that occur when characters learn what they believe to be true is erroneous. The creation of these individual worlds emphasizes the characters' history, worldview, and indoctrination. My goal in creating this body of work is to present a type of mirror in which we might see ourselves. These tales do not attempt to provide a moral answer, nor do they make judgments against those individuals that hold certain biases. Instead, I hope these stories will be a catalyst for questioning personally held beliefs by considering their developmental roots.

II. WORK HARD—PLAY HARD

Jackson works for a small company in Denton, four days a week, just outside of Dallas. On the fifth day, instead of actually working, he peruses Facebook for high school classmates before answering a few emails. After deciding he's doing better than most people from high school (or so it would appear), he spends the rest of his day walking up and down the executive hall to appear busy. By Friday, Jackson wants to do as little as possible, get home, and pour himself a scotch over ice.

Jackson likes to refer to himself as a *big fish in a small pond*, otherwise known as middle management. His routine is always the same: wake up at seven, grind coffee for the French press, step out for a smoke, go to work, sleep, and repeat. Every morning, he stands on his apartment stoop, bracing himself against below-freezing temperatures, bitterly sucking a refreshing cigarette butt.

Damn that Heather, he thinks resentfully.

"It stinks up the whole house." Heather insists.

"What is the world coming to? —When a man can't smoke in his own Goddamn house." He says, begrudgingly, before trotting outside.

Jackson and Heather have lived together now for almost ten years. He knows Heather is hoping he'll ask her to marry him soon, but for some reason, he holds out. He isn't quite sure why he doesn't want to ask her. For all purposes, Heather is the marrying kind, but something in his gut prevents him. He's a middle-aged man, sporting what is now lovingly referred to as a "dad bod," complete with balding scalp. Jackson's average, in every way, but the truth-of-the-matter is he thinks he's slightly too good for Heather. She's a portly brunette with average features, nothing Jackson would write home about.

But she has a shy, quiet demeanor and doesn't argue with him in public—a trait Jackson values in a woman. He originally entered into the relationship as a placeholder, simply in a holding pattern, waiting for another slot to open up. He wouldn't admit it to himself, but this is why he hadn't asked Heather to marry him. He felt he could do better given time.

When Jackson arrives to work this Friday, as usual, Katherine is at the front desk. Jackson gives her a little side-smile when he sees her.

“Well, hey there, Kat.” He says in a thick Texas drawl. “How's the day looking?”

“Busy.” She says curtly, plucking away at the keyboard. “I placed some messages on your desk. Gary asks that you call him as soon as possible.”

“Ugh, Gary. That guy's a pain in my ass.” Jackson says, sitting on the corner of Katherine's desk. “Anything else? What you got planned this weekend? Gonna go tear it up with the girls?” Kat sits quietly, ignoring this question.

Katherine is a pretty young thing (as Jackson often reminds her) of about twenty-five, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and two perky breasts that Jackson leers at when she speaks. Jackson explained his management philosophy to Katherine six years ago when he hired her, saying:

“Now, Kat, may I call you Kat?”

Before waiting for a response, he continues—

“If I were to hire you here, you'd have to understand our work philosophy. We work hard, but we play harder. That's how it goes around here. Sometimes all hell's breakin' loose, and then sometimes we're all just sitting around, shootin' the shit, or scrolling Facebook. Do you think you can handle that kind of environment?”

Katherine assured him she could, not that it truly mattered since Katherine's blouse that day hinted ever-so-slightly at a fine set of breasts. Jackson was going to hire her strictly on those merits alone. He wasn't sure when he developed an affinity for large bouncy breasts, but it was probably when he was six or so. Tornado sirens had just gone off in his hometown of Tyler, in east Texas, and Jackson's mother did the only thing she could. After placing him in the bathtub, she grabbed her queen-sized mattress and put it over the two of them. Jackson remembers lying there, terrified, his face smashed between the mattress and the pillowy safe bosom of his mother as a Tornado ripped through their home. Since that day, whenever he saw breasts, he just felt comforted. Jackson's dad had been a deadbeat, which was alright by him. Because when he wasn't a deadbeat, he was just a mean drunk who beat on his mamma and then beat on him. His father's death was one of the best things to ever happened to him.

Katherine and her husband were recently married, to Jackson's dismay. When he hired her six years ago, he thought there was a pretty solid chance she might sleep with him. He thought of this scenario often when he caught a free moment from the relentless presence of Heather. So far, to his frustration, it hadn't happened yet. But he'd heard when women get married, they sometimes go crazy trying to remind themselves they're beautiful with a little affair. So, as far as he was concerned, there was still hope.

"Well, alright, Kat. I'm gonna let you get back to doin' what you do. But I expect you to have my sandwich made before the day's out." Jackson winks at her before heading into his office. This was one of the many jokes he had with Katherine. He tells her he expects his sandwich, and she never brings one. It's just a little funny joke, is all. Katherine, above all, was a great little worker. She came in on time, stayed late to wrap

up loose ends, and pulled overtime when he asked. Jackson had no doubt she was gonna make a damn fine wife if she worked this hard at home.

Looking at the pile of messages stacked on his desk, he digs for the one with Gary's number on it. Dialing the number, he waits for Gary's nasally voice to pick up the line.

"Hello."

"Hey Gar', what's up?" Jackson asks with a tinge of annoyance.

"Jackson, thanks for getting back. Listen. We need to fill the New Accounts Liaison position, and we need you to scout someone from your department. You'll have to hire in a new man, so think about how you want all that to unfold, but we need someone in this new position by the end of the month. It's a slight raise for who you choose, so you should have no problem finding someone who wants to transition."

"Well shit, Gar', now I'm gonna have to shuffle things around. That's a real inconvenience for me. But I guess I'll start the hunt. Shoot me over the position profile so I can become familiar with it, would ya?" He says before hanging up the phone.



That evening, Jackson sits in his chair, feet propped up, laptop on his legs, a nice cold scotch in his hand. Reading through department resumés, he narrows the pool down to three candidates: Bob Renworth, Joe Marconi, and Kurt Branch. All are good guys he'd be happy to promote. Kurt's the newest, trained by Katherine last year, but he's sealed some pretty big accounts during the year. Truth be told, though, Jackson prefers Joe—a real stand-up wingman. Whenever he and Joe get together outside of work, things get crazy. If Jackson were to choose based on personality alone, Joe wins hands down.

However, Bob's been with the company the longest, almost five years. He knows Bob has a few young kids and a sweet little wife. That's a lot of responsibility for a man. Plus, he seems like a great dad. Jackson admires that, given his own history. In the end, he decides Bob has earned the spot as the most logical solution. He's been around the longest, and he'll work hard since he has something to work hard for. All around, Bob's just a nice guy.

On Monday, with scotch emanating ever-so-slightly from his pores, Jackson arrives groggily to work, retiring to his desk after his usual chit-chat with Katherine. He slumps into his leather chair in a windowless office, swallowing the Alka-Seltzer chaser Katherine has prepared for him. Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Bob passing by and jumps up to chase him down.

"Hey Bob," Jackson calls from the doorway, "can you come in here a minute?"

"Sure. What's up, boss?" Bob asks, following him into the office.

"Please, shut the door. Take a seat." He says, settling into his chair while clasping both hands together.

"Bob. You've been with the company a long time." Jackson starts.

"That's true, Boss."

"Well, the company appreciates the years you've put in, and we'd like to reward you." He takes a quick pause to let the message sink in. "The company feels you have what it takes to be the New Accounts Liaison. This position will come with added responsibility but also a pay increase. So what do you say? Are you interested?" He asks, knowing full-well Bob is interested.

"Wow, that is great news. Very unexpected news, but great." Bob replies. "Yeah,

boss, I'm ready for it. Put me on the job."

"Good boy. We haven't officially announced this position yet, but you're the frontrunner and the first person to come to my mind. You've been here longer than almost everyone in your department, and I know you have a family to support, so I'm happy to do it, Bob." He says, standing up; the men shake hands.

"I'll have HR reach out, and we can start unofficially switching you over to the new position until we find your replacement. After, we'll get you officially switch over. How's that sound?" He asks.

"Perfect. I'm excited about it." Bob says, trying to play it cool.

"Alright, buddy. I'll get this going and let you get back to work."

"Okay. Sounds good." Bob smiles.

"Oh, and would you mind closing the door on your way out," He says. As he leaves, Jackson feels pleased with his decision, convinced he'd made a great one.

When Bob gets back to his desk, he's beaming. Having swallowed the canary, he can now fully enjoy his fortuitous news. The shared office space is currently bustling with activity. Looking around, he notices his co-workers are frantically typing, hunched over their desks, with phones straddled between their shoulders and ears. The transportation office is currently in the middle of the stress-filled cargo season, which requires high levels of logistical support.

At the moment, Bob finds himself fidgeting in his chair, more than usual, and realizes he's dying to tell somebody the excellent news. He knows he should probably keep the information to himself, but ever since the new guy, Kurt, began bragging about his new boat, he's been sour. Specifically because Bob told Kurt he was saving up to buy

a boat later that year. Now, every week, Kurt obnoxiously recounts boat stories to him in the minutest of detail. Forced to play coy at being interested, Bob really wishes Kurt would just shut up.

Whispers were floating around the office that a new position was possibly opening up, and everyone was secretly gunning for it. Feeling compelled to seize a bragging opportunity of his own, he decides to share the good news with Kurt. The job is unofficially his, after all.

“Well, Kurt,” he starts, casually, “looks like I’ll be getting that boat a little sooner than I thought.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you do? Sell one of them kids?” Kurt replies jokingly.

“Yeah, right, I wish.” He replies, half-joking. “But no, you are looking at the company’s New Accounts Liaison.”

“When did they decide that?” Kurt inquires, agitated.

“Just now,” he says slyly, breaking into a big smile. “Looks like this little promotion will be getting me that boat. I’ll probably have my own office too. Geez, I sure am gonna miss those stories about the little water bucket you call a boat,” he finishes with a smug smile.

Kurt fell unusually quiet, redoubling his focus on the day's work. Jackson said he hadn't officially announced the position yet, but he didn't expressly state for Bob to keep it a secret. Still, after a little while, the churning in Bob's stomach made him acutely aware he'd fucked up, and he found himself wishing he could take it all back. Later, while entering the break room to enjoy his lunch, Katherine, Joe, and Kurt became suspiciously quiet at the sight of him. They are all talking about it, Bob observed.



After lunch, kicked back in his chair, Jackson reads another memo on the importance of safety in the workplace when Katherine bursts into his office, shutting the door behind her. This image perks Jackson up; standing before him is Kat mirroring the beginning of his favorite office fantasy: she slides into his office, shuts the door, tells him she can't stop thinking about him, sits on his desk, sprawling her beautiful legs astride him in his chair.

"Did you offer Bob the New Account Liaison position?" She says, interrupting his delusion in a tone of voice he's never witnessed before, with hands resting on her hips in an authoritarian stance.

Straightening up, he contemplates how to respond.

"Did you even once consider that I might be interested in that position? Did you even once consider me? I've been here the longest out of everyone in this office. I trained Bob, for Christ's sake. Why wasn't I considered? Please, tell me because I would like to know how I need to improve to be a viable candidate." She finishes sarcastically.

Kat's face is flushed, and he can see she's physically attempting to hold back her anger. She's incredibly sexy right now, Jackson thinks distractedly.

"Well, Kat, I'm sorry, I just didn't think you'd be interested," he responds.

"What part?" She asks.

"What part, what?" He says, confused.

“What part did you think I wouldn’t be interested in? The increased responsibility and respect, the acknowledgment for my time in service, the pay increase? Which part?”

She continues, not letting him get a word in. “What part, Jackson?”

Taking a minute, Jackson looks at Katherine contemplatively.

“You know what, Kat. You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. I don’t know why you didn’t come to mind. You’re a great employee, and maybe I selfishly didn’t want to let you go, but that’s not fair to you. I’ll have to think about this and re-evaluate my pool of candidates. Now that I know you want the position, I’ll make sure to consider you.

“That’s all I’m asking for,” she says.

Katherine opens the door to leave.

After thinking about what Katherine said for some time, Jackson realizes he will have to give Kat the position, otherwise, the whole thing could turn into a significant HR event. The last thing he needed was HR telling him he’s sexist in his hiring practices. She made a strong case for herself, and frankly, she downright frightened him.

“Great. Now I’m gonna have to break the news to Bob.” He says to himself.

There was something about Katherine’s demeanor in standing up for herself that reminded Jackson of his mother. His mother was strong, always fighting for what she wanted, including providing him with everything he needed. His mother was an amazing woman. She never wanted to be anything else but a mother.

Why would Katherine bother with some promotion when she could do the most honorable job in the world, he thinks.

“Hey Bob,” he calls from his desk, “can you come back in here, please.”



Today, Jackson winds down his day by entering the shared office space to take notes on the week's progress.

"Alright ya'll, what goose is still loose? What should the weekenders tackle, and what should we leave for Monday?" He asks, holding his notepad. Each team member gives him their final tallies while he makes a notation on what to divvy up over the weekend. Katherine is leaning over the new girl demonstrating how to mark the counts on the tracking system.

"How's it going, new girl?" He asks loudly in front of the whole office. "Is Kat being good to you over there? How are those tallies coming?"

"It's going fine, Jackson," Katherine replies. "She's getting the hang of it pretty quick."

"You gotta watch out for Kat, Michelle; she can be a little scary," he says, walking over to sit on the corner of the new girl's desk.

She's another pretty little thing, even younger than Katherine was, when she started with the company. A redhead this time, with vibrant green eyes. Jackson enjoys seeing his reflection in them.

"Really?" She says. "She doesn't seem very scary to me. Kat's been super helpful."

"Well, just don't make her mad, Michelle. She yelled at me once. Closed the door and everything, guys," he giggles before turning to the rest of the room. "Put the fear of God in me. Watch out for this one, boys. She'll be all our bosses before we know it."

"Hilarious, Jackson," Katherine says before showing the new girl how to read off

her tallies.

“I hope you know you’re being trained by the best, Michelle. We’re all real sad to see Kat go,” he responds with a hint of honesty. “But make sure she teaches you how I like my sandwich, alright. That’s the most important thing around here.”

Jackson gets up to leave as Katherine starts to roll her eyes.

“See you Monday, folks,” he hollers, just as Katherine says:

“You do not need to make his sandwich.”

III. WHERE THE SIDEWALKS ARE

Yolanda noticed her favorite pants were fitting tight right around the same time the area started hearing whispers of a proposed community coming to some acreage adjacent to her neighborhood. She decided to remedy this new clothing restriction by reducing weekly stops to her local pupuseria and making time for evening strolls. Every day, after arriving home from work, Yolanda slips on shoes to venture out into the fresh air for an hour or so of exercise.

“The gym is expensive,” her abuela says to her on the way out, “terreno is free.”

“You are so wise, abuela.” She replies, kissing her grandmother on the cheek, before leaving her in a chair on the small makeshift porch, perfect for neighborhood viewing. She smiles and waves at Yolanda with one hand resting on her cane. Giving a big smile back, Yolanda blows a kiss in her direction.

Embarking upon her preferred route through Comunidad Fronteriza, with rows of single and double-wide homes lined up next to each other, the place looks like pastels mixed up in the box. Each home displays individualized versions of a manicured lot: a porch, a stone patio, an elaborate concrete slab. Each resident is demonstrating their area of expertise on the front lawns. Tucked inside these lots are the outdoor gathering spaces, small gardens, kids’ playthings, and BBQ pits. Some neighbors have small fenced areas where they keep dogs who bark tirelessly as Yolanda passes, giving up only when they’ve decided she’s not a threat. Other homes pay homage to Our Lady of Guadalupe in statuesque form as she piously greets approaching visitors. A few flank their spaces with flags, so everyone knows where their World Cup loyalty lies.

Placing her hands on her hips, Yolanda closes her eyes for a brief moment,

allowing a soft breeze to wash over her while the sun engulfs her face. The sun is warm and soothing as the blazing heat starts to soften with its descent. With eyes closed, Yolanda's other senses take over. In the distance, she hears the low, faint hum of a lawnmower, interrupted by an obnoxious truck engine spewing and backfiring down a side street. Somewhere, a grill is sending sweet wafts of barbecue smoke in the air. Yolanda tries to identify the scent. Pork al pastor or carne asada, maybe? It reminds Yolanda, she must get back in time to help with dinner. Continuing, she passes the large open field where the neighborhood kids play fútbol. Eight of them are in the field tonight, ages ranging from ten to thirteen—their debate over who is the greatest echoes in the night air as they run back and forth.

“And here comes Santos!” One of them yells confidently.

“Che chulo. Flipar en colores,” little wannabe Santos says.

The sound of their adolescent trash talk makes Yolanda laugh.

“Lo tienes!” Yolanda screams at the boy. “Va Santos!”

“Lala, don't encourage him.”

Hearing her nickname, Yolanda squints her eyes against the sun. She realizes it's little Gabriel's voice.

“Aye, Gabriel, tell your mom I still have her dish. I'm gonna bring it back this weekend. I didn't forget.”

“I got you Yoyo.” Gabe says.

“Don't stay out too late boys. Leave time for your homeworks.” Yolanda advises them motheringly.

“OKAY LALA” The boys shout back sarcastically.

It was no use, she wouldn't be taken seriously, and fútbol would continue late into the night.

As their voices trail off, Yolanda's route segues onto Villita Avenida. A few houses up, she sees the barbecue smoke that she smelt earlier. And unsurprisingly, it appears to be coming from Beto's house. Beto has probably lived in the neighborhood since the first house was built. In a way, he was like everyone's abuelo. Sitting in Beto's driveway is the familiar circle of lawn chairs surrounding a small table stacked with tall boys and plates of food. Anyone, who's anyone, in the over sixty-five club of the neighborhood stops by at night. Just the guys tonight, Yolanda notices. Beto is at the grill trying to guard his secret recipe from prying eyes.

"You been tryin' to steal this recipe for twenty years, Leo. Don't think I don't notice. A grilling man's gotta protect his secrets." He says jokingly.

"I know the secret." Yolanda shouts from the street.

"Aye, Lala, come. Com'on now, sit." Beto gestures to an open chair.

"Ok. But only for a minute. I'm trying to get my fitness on." Yolanda enters the driveway taking a seat in the open chair and Leo grabs a tall boy, as if to offer her one.

"No thanks, Leo. If I have one of those I'll never leave. Or finish my walk."

"Suit yourself," he says opening it up.

"You only know the secret, Lala, because you tricked me with those six-year-old eyes. I'm a sucker for little girl's eyes." He says with nostalgic seriousness. "But lucky for me, Leo doesn't have that advantage."

It was true, Yolanda had been coming by Beto's place with her parents since she was a kid. His house was a main hub for Cinco de Mayo celebrations. He would often let

Yolanda watch him at the grill. The secret, Beto always told her, was a sprinkling of love. He said it made the food taste better. Beto would say it while sprinkling some seasoning on the meat. When Yolanda was little, she always thought it was really love he was putting on the food.

“Yolanda. Have some pastor.” He says.

“No Beto. Thank you. I have to help make dinner later and I’m trying to cut back on snacking.”

“What for?” Beto asked. “You don’t need all that diet stuff. You are a healthy young lady.”

“Well thanks, Beto, but my pants tell me differently.” Beto chuckles at her response.

“Ok, then. I guess I can’t argue with that.”

“Lala, did you hear?” Leo asks.

“Hear what?”

“Beto here, was offered a small fortune for his house on Ponca.” Leo informs her. “He can retire to his island now.”

“Aye, Leo. Don’t be telling the neighborhood all my secrets. This is why I can’t let you have too many tall boys. It makes you loose in the lips.” He quips.

“What? You know there’s no secrets in this neighborhood Beto. You dreamin’.” Leo wasn’t lying.

Everyone pretty much knew everything about each other here. Good and bad. Like how Maria on Montana Street made the best flan. And that Ms. Jade had a revolving door of men who came and went and occasionally left a new pregnancy. Or how Mr. and

Mrs. Vasquez on Suena would sometimes fight so loud that everyone waited in anticipation for the police to show up after she got fed up with him. Mr. Vasquez always came home eventually, and the cycle repeated. Everyone knew Mr. Vargas had the best manicured lawn in the whole park. And that Mr. Porter was secretly jealous of it and would passive-aggressively let his dog, Max, poop on his lawn without cleaning it up.

“Well it don’t matter none. I’m not selling it. It makes me plenty as a rental.”

Beto tells Leo.

“You know Lala, I get \$2400 a month. \$2400 now. Can you believe it?” He says, while moving meat around on the grill. “When I moved here with my parents, my brother Carlos and I went to pick tomatoes in the fields. Everyday. At five-years-old. My brother was seven. Now I get \$2400 a month for one house. My parents, may they rest-in-peace, could never imagine their sons’ lives now. When we were in high school, none of our west-side friends would ever want to come over here. They were so afraid. Remember that Leo?” He asks.

“I remember. We’d say, ‘come over, have some food with our family, see our rooms, play fútbol with us,’ they were always afraid.” Leo explains. “I guess their moms and dads told them this is where people get murdered and raped and stuff. I never knew it. I never saw it.”

“They didn’t know any more than what they were told.” He says. “Some came, though. Remember Charlie, Leo? We got pretty close in school.”

“Oh yeah, I remember him. He had those glasses, right?” Leo confirms.

“Yeah, exactly. That’s him. Now they’re all coming over here and paying 2400 dollars. I never thought I’d see the day.” Beto laughs.

“You know Lala,” he says sitting down, “my brother and I started our tile company, in the seventies, and little-by-little we saved and bought these houses for \$10,000 or \$20,000. They were total shit, but we fixed ‘em enough to rent ‘em, and made a little more money, and then a little more. And today, I live on it. It allows me to live in my neighborhood, grill, visit, play cards with the guys. This is where I want to be. I don’t need no island. What do I need 750,000 dollars for?” He asks, conspicuously dropping the offer he received on the house. “I’ll let my kids sell ‘em and get rich.” Beto laughs.

“Wow, Beto. Well, we couldn’t afford to lose you in this neighborhood. Who would sprinkle it with love?” Yolanda says, giving him a knowing wink.

“Aye, Lala, you flatter an old man too much.” He smiles.

“It’s crazy though, Beto. I work all the time and I can’t even afford to live anywhere else anymore. I’ll be lucky if I can ever move out of my parents’ house.” She tells him.

“Why would you want to? Your mom needs you and you have plenty of time to move when you find someone to share a life with. There’s no rush Lala. Stay with your family. That’s the better way. You’ll always have support with family.” Beto says pointing a finger at nothing in particular.

“Speaking of family, I better get moving so I’m not late supporting Abuela in the kitchen.” She says, standing up.

“How is that old rebel?” He asks.

“Feisty as ever, Beto, feisty as ever.” Yolanda laughs.

“Tell her I say hi and to come around. I’ll make her a plate.”

“You got it.” She tells him, leaning down to chair-level she gives him a slight

hug. As she departs, Beto and Leo wave from their chairs, returning to their gossip.

Starting back down Avenida, Lola redoubles her efforts to increase her heart rate. As her breathing increases she feels herself slip into the zone. Sounds become faint, houses blur together, and thoughts diminish as she enters a light meditative state. Everything feels like a familiar, normal extension of herself—the pavement under her sneakers, the swishing of her Spandex pants, the car sounds, the faint voices, the music seeping out open doors. Yolanda moves aside seamlessly when she hears cars approaching from behind. Walking. Walking. Walking. Until...

A new road. An unknown space. A sidewalk?

At the end of Cimarron drive, where the old lot used to house stray cats and crickets, was a sprawling neighborhood of large identical new homes. Small signifiers had begun appearing last summer when the lot was fenced off to keep local wanderers out. First, a neon-vested surveyor, then men in white hard hats lifting utility holes and electrical lines, then trickle by trickle, the bulldozers arrived. Folks would peak through holes in the fence and report back to the neighborhood:

“Did you hear? They’ve started digging up the dirt. It’s piled as high as a mountain.”

“They’re putting in rebar for foundations. Real big ones. The size of two homes if you ask me.”

“Looks like they’ve planted trees.”

“I see people coming by the sales trailer all the time. Young people. I hear they’re selling for \$550,000. That’s the starting price. The lowest price. Can you believe it?”

“Wonder what my place would go for now?”

“Where would you move to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nowhere around here, I guess.”

In front of her, the fence is now down, open to the rest of them. The street, stretching far up into hills that look down on Yolanda’s neighborhood, now show signs of life. Cars in driveways, or parked on the street, and at her feet, a pristine stretch of sidewalk. For some reason, this subtle difference from Yolanda’s neighborhood feels like a slight sting.

Yolanda places a toe on the edge of the new curb. Contemplating a moment, she decides to continue her walk on this new path. Along the unblemished sidewalk, she peers at each house, examining them with curiosity. The homes are monochrome shades of sand, Yolanda imagines their names—*Soft beige*, *Beige*, *Intense beige*, *Ultimate beige*, and *Beige All Over*. Yards are large, green, and empty, except for the occasional tree or rosebush, plain and generic, and devoid of all information. She tries to catch a glimpse of life through the windows. Sometimes she catches what looks like light from a TV, or maybe a lamp, but no indication as to who lives here. Windows are closed, curtains and blinds drawn, and there are few sounds or smells. Maybe they don’t cook, Yolanda thinks.

As she continues, she looks to cars for information—SUVs, 4-door Sedans, and then there are the high-end cars—a Mercedes here, a Porsche there. She never thought she’d see such a thing in her area. Usually, these cars just speed through, quick as can be, with windows rolled up. Generally, they’re looking for shortcuts to avoid highway traffic. Yolanda thinks back to the boys playing fútbol in the field. You could put two or three

kids through college for these car prices, she thinks.

Continuing her walk, Yolanda ventures deeper onto new streets, with unfamiliar names—Pioneer, Pershing, McMann, Converse. In her eagerness to explore, she fails to notice the sun setting behind the last visible cloud. Streetlights and porchlights become the prevalent light source and Yolanda is again confronted with the differences between her neighborhood and this new one. Her neighborhood is black as obsidian tonight because porchlights cost money. Realizing she must get home, she turns down a street leading to the main road, only to discover she's lost. Did I pass this house before, she thinks? All these damn houses look the same.

She continues to wander down streets in search of the main road, when the evening wind starts to pick up. Yolanda feels a chill across her body, and suddenly, she's frightened, like someone is watching her. She swivels her head, ensuring no one's following her. Is that someone peering through the shades? Everything about this new neighborhood feels unwelcoming and wrong. She begins to fear she will be lost forever, consumed by large beige houses, never to be seen again. But then a bright red Porsche, shining like a beacon, gives Yolanda the reassurance she needs. She remembers seeing it as she left the main road. Quickening her pace, Yolanda rushes toward it. A sigh of relief washes over Yolanda when she sees the sign which reads, Cimarron drive.

"Gracias a Dio." She whispers.

On Cimarron, Yolanda finds comfort as familiar surroundings return—the small, colorful homes, the cars in need of repair, an open window with *A Dios le Pido* piercing the silence. Closing her eyes, Yolanda listens to her neighborhood, and for the first time, she notices its beautiful soundtrack-like quality. She decides, there's nothing like the

sound of home.

In front of her house, she looks at her Abuela still seated in her viewing chair, under the porchlight. The sky-blue trailer with its painted white porch and hot pink rose bushes look more vibrant than ever.

“What did I miss?” She asks her Abuela.

“Nada niña, just the regular. I’m frying sopapillas for dessert tonight. You want to help me roll them?” She asks.

“Aye Abuela, I’m trying to fit into my pants, not burst out of them.” Yolanda jokes.

“Silenciar, Lala. You can’t get fat from love. Sopapillas are full of love.” Abuela says, waving a finger at Yolanda.

“Everyone is always sprinkling love around here, and I still see big unas barriga aquí.” She replies. Abuela just laughs.

“Com’on.” She says getting up slowly, clinging to her cane. “Let’s go. Help your Abuela.”

Grabbing onto her delicate arm, Yolanda helps her grandmother into their home.

HOME, Yolanda thinks.

IV. THE GOOD ONES

Mom, Sisi, and I moved in with Pop'pop and Grandma this summer, right before the start of sixth grade. Mama says it's only temporary until she can find a nice place for us.

Daddy didn't come.

Sisi and I feel right at home in Pop'pop and Grandma's house since we spend most summers and holidays here. They have four rooms in their big house with a large book collection in the basement, and an old eight-track player. This is where Sisi and I swing dance to *Rock Around the Clock*—Grandma showed us how. They have one TV in the living room which we all gather around after Sisi and I shower in the evening.

Pop'pop reclines in his Lazy-boy chair while grandma reclines in her own. Sisi and I take to the floor with elbows propped up on pillows in nightgowns.

Mom works late.

Pop'pop clicks through to his preferred evening programming, where the Lawrence Welk jazz band comes on to a backdrop of bright pastel colors. We love the segments with pretty women, who sing and dance in heels with long flowing dresses. After Lawrence Welk, he flips to our favorite—The Cosby Show. Sisi and I laugh at the punchlines and imitate Dr. Huxtable's many silly faces toward Theo and Rudy.

Pop'pop laughs too, saying, "He's one of the good ones. I don't like many of 'em, but he's one of the good ones."

The Cosby Show is followed by The Jeffersons, but he always changes the channel when it comes on. "I'm not watching this trash, nothing but a bunch of—"

But Grandma cuts him off tartly, "Don't you go saying that kind of language

around the girls, Bill!”

We know the word. We’ve heard him say it before in the car when Grandma isn’t around.

“Look at this—” he says, “these folks should get off the road. Buncha uneducated—” he says.

We don’t know exactly what it means; but we know Dr. Huxtable isn’t one of them, he’s one of the good ones, an educated man like Pop’pop.



Pop’pop and Grandma have a big yard full of maple trees; in the fall when school starts, Grandma lets us go outside until it’s time for Pop’pop to drive us to school. There’s a small flower garden with purple and yellow pansies, which Grandma let us plant, and Lilacs are still hanging on the bush. We practice cartwheels and handstands up and down the yard, making sure to avoid the small gravestone where the German Shepherd is buried.

School is only a couple blocks away, but he insists on driving us in the Wagoneer. We tell him all our friends walk to school, but he doesn’t care.

“The neighborhood isn’t like it used to be. More of ‘ems moving into the area,” he says. “Can you believe it?” he asks.

We never know what to say.

“I have to keep my two best girls safe,” he says, winking in the rearview mirror.

Sisi and I separate when Pop’pop drops me off at middle school. The maple leaves are starting to show some color around the school. This is my first year with a locker and class periods. As a transfer, the school says I need help with math and reading,

so my first period is spent in a resource room. Mom explains it to me:

“They’re just going to give you a little help is all. Some extra attention one-on-one. A lot of kids need that when they move. And mommy’s been working. I haven’t had as much time, as I used to, for helping with homework.”

Mom wasn’t really good at homework even when she was helping. Usually it was Dad’s job, and he was in some other state somewhere.

Mrs. Fletcher teaches in the Resource Room. She has big blue eyes, and her blonde hair is teased to perfection. She seems young and looks like a model from Seventeen magazine. I want nothing more than to please her with my progress.

I sit by Darel in the Resource Room. Sometimes he tells me he likes my outfit or that I look pretty that day. He has bright brown eyes and a smile that makes me blush. He looks a little like Theo Huxtable. He is very cool. We talk about all kinds of things after going over our resource assignments in class.

“Do you like Kriss Cross?” He says with a big smile.

“I’ve never heard of him.” I respond shyly.

“It’s a them, there’s two of ‘em—Kriss and Cross. I will make a copy for you. I think you’ll like ‘em. They’re cool.”

Some days, when we finish our assignments early, Mrs. Fletcher lets us play Oregon Trail. Darel and I usually discuss strategy but one day instead, he asks if he can walk me home.

“Oh, my Pop’pop usually picks me up.” I say regretfully. “He doesn’t like me to walk home.”

“Oh. Ok. I understand.” He says.

“Maybe you can come over to my house after school and we can hang out in the yard,” I say. “Like around three-thirty?”

“Ok. I’ll come by.” He says, and I slip him a piece of paper with my address on it.

At home I wait anxiously in the living room for Darel to come.

The doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it.” I shout to the house, jumping up to answer the door, but Pop’pop enters from the kitchen.

“Now wait just a minute, young lady,” he says, halting me at the door, “you don’t go just answering the door. You get a grown-up to do it.”

“Sorry.” I tell him.

Pop’pop opens the door to find Darel standing on the porch with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

“How can I help you, young man?” Pop’pop asks.

“Hello, sir. I am here to see Bethany.” Darel says looking up at Pop’pop—then down to the floor—then back up.

“He’s my friend from class.” I say squeezing my way past Pop’pop and the door. “Can we go hang out in the yard?” I ask looking up at Pop’pop with excited, begging eyes.

“Now, don’t you kids have homework?” Pop’pop rationalizes.

“Yes, sir.” Darel says.

“Well, why don’t you come on into the kitchen and work on some homework and then you can go hang out on the deck.” He finally says.

“Thank you, Pop’pop.” I say excitedly. “Come on Darel, it’s this way.”

“Thank you, sir.” Darel says.

Pop’pop makes us a snack, toast with jelly and cheddar cheese, and pours us small cups of soda pop. We go over our math drills and then answer questions about the reading assignment.

Once outside on the large deck, Darel shows me the Walkman he’s brought in his backpack.

“I made you a mixtape with all the best songs on it. But first you have to listen to Kriss Cross,” he says excitedly, “You’re going to love ‘em.”

Turning the tape case around in my hands I listen to the steady beats of “jump, jump” as Darel smiles at me. He has written the songs and artists on the inside cover:

Kriss Cross - Jump

Janet Jackson – Rhythm Nation

Boyz II Men – Motown Philly

Lionel Richie – Say you say me

Bel Biv Devoe -Poison

Lisa Lisa Cult Jam – Lost in Emotion

Bobby Brown – My Prerogative

Whitney Houston – How Will I know

Tribe Called Quest—Bonita Applebum:

Kool and the Gang - Fresh

Darel’s favorite

Laying on the porch, in the crisp autumn air, we look up at the vibrant-colored maple trees and take turns listening to each song. Darel rewinds or fast-forwards each song until it's at the right spot. As it starts to get dark, Mom appears and says it's time to give Darel a ride home.

I listen to his mixtape every night in bed, until Grandma pokes her head in the door.

"My Goodness, Bethany. You should be fast asleep by now." She comes over and sits on the edge of the bed removing the headphones from my ears. "Turn out the light and go to bed, stinker," she says, kissing me on the forehead. "You have five more minutes."

Reaching over, I turn off the lamp but place the headphones back on my ears, pressing play, I drift off to sleep.



By seventh grade, Darel and I have graduated from the resource room and see less of each other during the school day; but after school we spend time in the yard. Lounging on the tire swing attached to the biggest oak, we talk about music and fashion and who's going steady with who.

"Well, I heard Ashley found a note from Sam in her locker, asking her to go steady." I tell him. "Do you think Ashley's pretty?"

"Nah." Darel says. "She wears too much make-up. What's she tryin' to hide?"

I laugh at him while playfully slapping him on the arm.

"I never thought about it that way."

"My daddy told me to 'never trust a woman who can't show her true face,'" Darel

smiles.

“My mom hates when I wear make-up. She’s always taking it away.” I tell him begrudgingly.

“That’s because you’re too pretty to wear make-up. You don’t need to hide your face.” He says, smiling shyly.

Reflexively, I cast my eyes downward, feeling my face flush with embarrassment.

“Do you really think that?” I ask.

“You know I do. I just don’t make mixtapes for anyone.” Darel laughs grabbing hold of my hand.

We lay there in silence; holding hands; swinging in the humid breeze; watching fireflies puncture a twilight sky; listening to *our* mixtape.

“I have to get inside. Mom will want me to get my homework done.” I finally say.

“Alright, let’s go Bethy.” he says.

As we start to round the corner toward the porch, Darel grabs my hand pulling me back.

“Beth,” he says, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Will you be my girlfriend?” He says looking me straight in the eyes. His eyes are big—scared—vulnerable.

Smiling, I say, “Yes.”

“And can I kiss you?”

My heart starts to pound fast, like an excited dog-tail hitting a piece of furniture; I can feel it pounding in my ears; they feel like their ringing.

I say, “yes.”

Darel takes a step closer, leans in, and places a kiss on my lips. It is delicate and wet, and he smells like the beach, like coconuts and sand. My stomach feels sick, like when daddy use to drive too fast on Amish country roads, which undulate with the landscape.

There’s a loud knock.

Darel and I jump apart.

Mom’s face is looking at us from the living room window and she mouths—get inside.

“Bye.” I say, with a slight giggle.

Mom is standing in the living room when I enter the house. For a moment, it seems like she is evaluating me for something, then she says, “get on that homework, girl.”

“Yes ma’am.” I respond, heading to the kitchen table.

Mom enters my room that evening after my shower while I’m drying my hair.

“Bethany. Mamma wants to talk to you for a minute.” She says.

“Ok.” I say, switching off the dryer.

“Tell me. Do you like that boy Darel?” Her voice asks sweetly.

“Of course. He’s my friend.” I say, as I notice my hands are fidgeting.

“Are you just friends?” She places her hand over mine to calm them, “It looked like he kissed you.”

“Am I in trouble?” I ask timidly.

“You’re not in trouble.” She says, giving me a slight hug. “Did you want to kiss

Darel?”

“Yes, I think so. He wants me to be his girlfriend, and I really, really like him.

Mom, I told ‘em I would.”

“Who wouldn’t want this beautiful girl?” Mom says giving me a curious look, and then adds, “Well, maybe don’t tell Pop’pop. Ok?”

“Will he be mad?” I ask.

“Bethany, I won’t tell you who to love. People can’t help who they fall in love with, but God asks us to make sacrifices in his name, and it is written in the Bible that people should marry their own type.”

This declaration seems to trickle out of Mom’s mouth like honey—smooth and sweet and sticky. The words hang oppressive in the air around me as she continues.

“Now I know Darel is a good boy, and you can’t help the way you feel about him, but you can control your behavior. It’s what God asks of us. You know how in Bible school you learned that Eve was tempted?” Mother asks.

“Yes.”

“Well dear, sometimes we have to fight sinful desires and follow God’s law.” She says, placing her hands lovingly on my cheeks.

Looking at my mother’s tender eyes a question forms at the tip of my lips, “But I thought God loves all his children?” I finally ask.

“Of course he does, honey. God loves Darel and all people. Darel is a great friend for you, but God wants us to marry someone that is the same as us—a good boy—a good Christian boy,” she says.

“You want to make it to heaven, don’t you?”

Silence lingers in the air as I think about, not heaven, but hell—devils and demons of torture, burning flesh, and punctured skin—like Freddy Krueger I imagine—a dream you never wake from.

“Of course Mamma,” escapes meekly from my deflated lungs.

“Well then, you’re going to have to look inside your heart and let Jesus guide you,” she says kissing my forehead. “Now, go to bed.”

That night, I don’t listen to Darel’s mixtape; instead I cast it aside in the bedside table and close the drawer.



I tell Darel he can’t come by in the evenings anymore because I need to keep up with my studies. He asks if Mom saw us kiss and if I got in trouble. I lie and tell him no.

Darel’s mixtape stays buried in the bottom of the drawer.

When Darel looks at me, and smiles, I look ahead and pretend not to see.

I avoid his eyes.

Darel never asks me why, and never brings up being boyfriend and girlfriend again.

Eventually, I start looking at Ben—tall, blonde, ocean blue eyes—like me.

There’s a rumor Ben was held back a year to repeat eighth grade, but I never ask him. All the girl’s talk about how strong he is, how handsome, how rich—he’s one of the good ones they say—really going someplace. For some reason, Ben notices me at church and starts sitting behind me so he can mess with my braid while I’m trying to pay attention to sermon.

I whip around and narrow my eyes at him, whispering, “knock it off, Ben!”

Ben smiles and giggles and goes right back on doing it.

Mom tells me—“he does it, because he thinks you’re pretty; he wants you to notice him.”

Ben asks Pop’pop if he can sit by me in church one day and he’s thrilled to say yes, even shaking Ben’s hand.

“I’m happy to finally see you spending time with such an appropriate, well-mannered, young Christian Bethany,” he says in the car. “That boy is a good one; comes from real good stock; a good Christian family; real fine people.”

“That’s right, he’s real cute too,” Mom says, winking at me.

I roll my eyes at her and stare out the window until orange, yellow, and red leaves blur into traces as we drive by.

Ben meets me at my locker in the morning and throws his arm over my shoulders and tells everyone I’m his girl. Ben and his friends sit with my friends at lunch now, and they all tell us how cute we are. At lunch, he drinks most of my soda pop and talks over me loudly when I start to speak. My friends all tell me how lucky I am—he’s such a good guy—one of the good ones. Ben and I don’t talk about much, but we make the perfect couple—like my mom says: you two would make beautiful blonde babies. In the halls, Ben sneaks up behind me and pinches my bum.

Everyone who hears me squeal, laughs and says: “That Ben is so clever. Hilarious, Ben.”

Ben comes to my volleyball matches and sits with his friends in the bleachers, who shout, “Go Bethany!” At a home game I notice Mrs. Fletcher is watching some seventh graders play.

“What are you doing here, Mrs. Fletcher? I didn’t know you were a volleyball fan?” I ask.

“Oh, my daughter is playing,” she says.

“Oh yeah, which one is your daughter?”

“The tall one in the middle there,” she points out.

Looking at the group of girls I see her up front in the middle—sort of tall, blondish hair, like Mrs. Fletcher.

“Oh, the one up front there by the net,” I say.

“No, Bethany, the one in the middle.” She points again.

“Oh, I’m sorry. The one with the blue barrette.” I confirm.

“No, Bethany,” she says, confusing me further.

Finally, realizing I’ll never get it, she tells me, “Bethany, this is my husband,” placing her hand on a gentleman’s leg sitting next to her. On the left of Mrs. Fletcher is a well-dressed, handsome black man, with salt and pepper hair, wearing a suit. Suddenly, the very tall girl in the center of the court who I had discounted twice before makes sense. I feel ashamed, like when I use to answer questions wrong in the resource room.

“Oh,” I say, “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“It’s ok,” she says, like she has this problem all the time.

As I watch her daughter, I wonder if Mrs. Fletcher knows she’s going to hell. I debate if I should tell her. I’m afraid maybe no one told her, or she didn’t read it in the Bible. But then I realize I don’t know where it’s located in the Bible so how would I even tell her. So I say nothing and decide I’ll pray for her later—maybe it will save her from eternal damnation. I’m not sure.



In the spring, Pop'pop says he "supposes" its ok if Ben walks me home after school.

"A big chap like Ben won't have any problem dealing with 'em hooligans that TP'd the Stevenson's place over Halloween," he says. "I know the type. Probably one of them—"

"Pop'pop!" Mom interrupts. "You know I hate that word. When are you going to join this century?"

Ben walks me home after school, usually with his arm around me, saying "you're my girl Bethany."

Sometimes he wanders off the street to grab a long stick and lifts my skirt a little—"as a joke," he says.

The closer we get to the house; the more Ben straightens his shirt collar and flattens out any creases. Sometimes Pop'pop is out front talking to the new neighbor, Mr. Robinson, about lawn treatments and the best time to start aeration. He says Mr. Robinson reminds him of Dr. Huxtable—"real put together—not like some of the rest."

One day, Ben says, "Hey, I want to show you something," on our walk home.

"Ben, I have work to do." I tell him, spinning out from his arm around my shoulder. "Let's just get to the house."

"C'mon Bethy. Don't be like that," he says, grabbing ahold of my hand, "it'll be real quick."

"Fine."

"It's back this way," he says, leading me by the hand down a hidden trail.

Coming to a clearing, there's a little blue disheveled shed.

"Isn't it cool?" He asks. "Come look inside."

Inside, the shed holds a few left-over gardening supplies; it's cold and feels slightly damp.

"We shouldn't be in here Ben. Someone might see us. This isn't our property."

"No one will see us, Bethy," Ben says.

Placing his arm around my shoulder again, Ben leans in to kiss me, hard and aggressive. Not like it was with Darel. My stomach feels sick—but not like a drive through the country—like watching a horror movie, when you know someone is about to die.

"No, Ben. Stop." I say, but he silences me, knocking me down to the cold, damp floor.

"You're my girl, Bethy," he keeps saying. "My girl."

While it happens to me, I stare at the rusty ceiling, and think about hell again. Mamma never told me the devil was blonde and beautiful. I guess the bible never mentioned it. I was told to avoid the other ones—the ones like Darel—not the good ones—like Ben. Ben was supposed to be one of the good ones.

And I never told—I never told anyone that I saw the devil.



When school restarts, I ride the bus. Darel always sits holding hands with Rachelle on the bus now and avoids my eyes. Rachelle is fresh-faced and pretty with almond-shaped brown eyes. Tight brown curls frame her sweet face, and she wears very little makeup because she must not have anything to hide. I can't remember where I put

Darel's mixtape now, and it nags at me, sometimes keeping me up at night. Did I lose it?
But then I remember my Walkman's broken now anyway, so it doesn't really matter.
Darel and Rachelle take turns listening to a CD player between them on the bus. I wonder
if Darel's showing her the same songs, or are they new? Hand-picked, just for her. I
decide I hate Rachelle.

And Mamma.

And Pop'pop and Grandma.

And Ben.

And god.

V. THE MIGRANT

Giovanni tilts his plate, collecting sweet tomato juice to one side. Then, using the crusty scarpetta, he sops up the tangy sauce with the little remaining piece of bread. Cora sits opposite Giovanni, watching him, while quietly sipping on twice-brewed espresso. Their situation didn't allow for anything to go to waste, and Cora was well-versed in reusing, preserving, and mending all rations.

"Do you expect a good catch today?" She finally asks, breaking the silence.

"One can hope." He replies.

"We need a good catch, Giova." She says tartly.

"It should be good. The stoneflies are out," he tells her, standing up to replace his mustard-colored coveralls. He motions toward the door, signaling the end of the conversation.

Coral steps in front of the kitchen doorway, crossing her arms, she places all her weight on one hip.

"I heard Matteo was caught bringing drifters to shore, at least ten of them. I hear he was fined 3,000 Euros. Three thousand, Giova. They say he might lose his license." She explains, pursing her lips.

"People say a lot of things. People should talk less and listen more, I think."

"Promise me you will not pick up any drifters on the sea. Promise, if you see them, you will go the other way. I only want to see fish coming to shore on that boat," she says, shifting from one hip to the other. "We could never survive that sort of punishment. It would ruin us."

He sighs, "I promise. I won't put anyone on my boat. Only fish. I need to go. The

fish will be feeding soon.” He kisses Cora on the forehead before sliding her out of his path; grabbing his hat, he departs for the night’s catch.

After leaving his flat, Giovanni’s pace quickens with excitement. Warm westerly winds brush against his neck—a good omen. At the pier, he unties his small blue fishing vessel, *Prosperità del Mare*, losing her into the sea. Her paint is tattered and torn, and some of her hardware is rusty, but *Prosperità*, above all, is seasoned and trustworthy. Taking the throttle, he knows her every creak and moan and how she maneuvers against wind and wave. They have experienced many ups and downs together, from his largest haul to his most meager. His relationship with *Prosperità* is as real as with any woman, and she is just as temperamental when mistreated. Settling into her current condition, *Prosperità* calmly cuts through the rippling ocean while Giovanni keeps his eyes on the setting sun against the horizon. He encounters a swarm of feeding fish about an hour after high tide.

Venturing toward the first dropped seine net, he is pleased to see a gathering of stoneflies reflected by the soft sun. Collecting the net’s weighted end, Giovanni reels in the catch over the boat’s drum. Little by little, fish appear—a colorful flying fish, an octopus, the lovely Bonito, the classic swordfish, a bluefin tuna—as they collect, Giovanni tosses each one into a saltwater vat.

Perhaps, I will buy Cora some pink roses on the way home, he thinks happily. Five nets in total, all five traps are just as full. It’s a good haul, indeed. With bright optimism, Giovanni reels the last of the fifth net around the drum. Having collected a good variety of fish, perhaps one-hundred-fifty or so, he begins the process of replacing the fifth seine for his return at low tide. While pleasantly working with the net, Giovanni

hears a faint cry on the ocean. He pauses. Could it be the siren's song, Parthenope coming to avenge her aquatic brethren? Again, on the wind, the sound travels to Giovanni from the east, and there, upon the horizon, are the silhouettes of pleading arms, like dozens of outstretched snakes. When the last of the net falls into place, he considers Cora's warning, 3,000 Euros in fines, possibly more. The wailing voices seem to grow louder. As though compelled, Giovanni turns the boat in the direction of shouts.

Looking toward the large cooler he keeps stocked with refreshments he decides to bring them water. The closer he gets to the drifters, the more he begins to feel they were sirens all along. On a grey rubber dinghy designed for twenty, there are at least sixty men, women, and children with melanin-rich faces teetering loosely on the dinghy's edge. They are overheated and exhausted, and a few are already unconscious. One man seems to be in a state of convulsion, eyes rolling to the back of his head. Each voice cries out for help in French, Arabic, Swahili, or some other native tongue.

"Salve," he shouts. "I have water. I'm going to get close so I can pass it to you."

With these words, the digyny enters a frenzy of movement. Most bodies cling to each other, but some, the strongest and most willful, try standing up to be the first to receive assistance. The dinghy wobbles off balance, and he fears it will capsize.

"No. Stay seated, please. Stop. Listen, sit down!" he shouts.

As others echo his sentiment, the individuals finally sit back down, and the dinghy restabilizes. Giovanni maneuvers the boat closer, and opening the chest, begins handing bottles of water to the drifters. Their hands grab the bottles, like tentacles, desperately reaching for the contents, this elixir of life. But the drifters begin to realize this is all Giovanni has to offer. As the cooler quickly empties, they grow reasonably

suspicious that they are doomed for abandonment. Giovanni notices one of the men has stood up and is attempting to board the boat.

“No.” He shouts to the man. Taking an oar Giovanni pushes the man back onto the dinghy. “Stay here for the other boat. It will come.”

The entire dinghy goes mad with hysteria. Now it is not just one man, but many men standing up to board Giovanni’s boat. Stepping over weak and feeble bodies, men and women desperately scratch at the boat’s side, trying to catch hold. A few succeed and the boat leans toward the dinghy so others can grab ahold. Giovanni begins to fear his ship will be dragged under by the mob of drifters. Then he will lose everything. There will be no big catch, no money for the year, and no pink roses for Cora. This might be one of Parthenope’s punishments, after all.

“No. I cannot take you. Stay here. Sit down. I cannot help you. Just water.”

The people’s eyes look up into his face, and the whites glow bright with panic. A mother on the edge of the dinghy is holding her baby in the air, thrusting it toward Giovanni. The baby is now screeching so loud that Giovanni turns from it, avoiding the mother’s gaze. He can no longer look at the her agony or the twisted faces of these drifting incubi. Making his way back to the helm of the boat, he throttles ahead and starboard, only flinching once at the sound of a thud against the boat. He doesn’t look back.

Safely out of reach, Giovanni’s breathing starts to calm. Once fully collected, he looks back at the cockpit to check his cargo. There, on the decking, is a crumpled little figure. Cutting the boat’s engine, Giovanni rushes to the silent mass. It’s the baby. The little baby. The thud? The mother threw it—her own baby. Picking up the tiny creature,

Giovanni checks to see if it's breathing—just barely, and faint. The infant is wet and cold. Rushing it to the helm, he removes the flimsy, wet swaddle and wraps it in a flannel jacket draped on a hook. Holding the infant close to his body he rubs his hand across its back in an attempt to generate heat.

“Hang on, little one. We will get you to shore,” he says, clutching it close to his breast while throttling the boat forward.

The infant whimpers for a while and later cries before passing out with exhaustion. Lights illuminate his usual docking point against the blackness of night, and Giovanni stops the boat. Looking at the silently sleeping baby he considers the 3,000 Euros.

“Now what, little one? What should we do?” He asks.

Looking around the boat, he opens the cooler, once filled with bottles of water. Giovanni dumps the remaining ice and liquid into the ocean. Extending each drainage hatch, he secures the container nearby. As the boat slowly approaches the drop-off point, he waits as long as possible and then lays the wrapped-up bundle inside the cooler.

“Ok little one. We must remain quiet.” He says, closing the lid softly.

Giving two low blows of the boat's horn, an attendant meets Giovanni at the dock. It's a tall, sleek figure, and in the moonlight, he recognizes him as Adriano.

“Buongiorno, Giova. How's the catch?” Adriano asks.

“The evening's been a success,” he says. “Come look.”

Climbing onto the boat, Giovanni lifts the barrel lids so he can witness his catch.

“Looks like you'll be celebrating tonight, Giova. Drinks on you this week?”

Adriano smiles.

“Indeed,” He replies.

“Immigration authority just needs to sign the boat off, and we’ll offload the barrels to be weighed and paid out.” Adriano signals a gentleman in uniform carrying a clipboard. Slinking up next to the boat, the man awkwardly climbs aboard the vessel.

“I must speak to him right away,” he tells Adriano.

“Buongiorno, tutti. Signor Alfieri, I just need to quickly look around and make sure there are no castaways.” The man says coldly.

“Of course,” Giovanni says. “Sir, please, I encountered some drifters at my fifth drop. You must send a vessel out. There were about sixty people in real bad shape. I left them there, but they will not last long. I can write down the coordinates for you. They should still be in the area if a boat departs soon.” Scribbling the dinghy’s location on the clipboard, Adriano leaves to radio it in right away.

“Thank you, you did the right thing,” Signor Alfieri says haughtily. “The procedures are fundamental and must be followed. If boats keep bringing drifters onshore without following procedure, we will be overrun.”

“It didn’t feel like the right thing to do,” He replies in a defunct tone. “Do you mind if I start packing up? It’s late, and my Cora is waiting.”

“No, of course, please, proceed as normal.”

As the authority wanders around the boat, Giovanni collects his jacket and hat, throwing a bag over his shoulder onto his back. Finally, he grabs the cooler and moves to exit the boat.

“Scusi,” signor Alfieri calls out. “What’s in the cooler?”

Turning around, He smiles calmly.

“Oh, this? It’s empty,” he says, lifting it high in the air over his head. “I don’t think a castaway can fit in this old thing. It wouldn’t be very enjoyable if they could. It smells awful, like fish chum. I’m going to have the wife give it a proper scrub. Would you like to see it?”

Looking at signor Alfieri’s slightly greened face, he got the feeling he was not accustomed to boat life. The thought of fish guts was an undesirable one.

“No, that will not be necessary. Have a good evening.”

Placing the cooler carefully in his vehicle, Giovanni lifts the lid to find the infant still asleep.

“Well done, little one. Now you just have to win over Cora,” he says, “the absolute authority has yet to be confronted.”

On the way home, he stops to grab some goat's milk and pink roses but instead opts for yellow mimosas. On the doorstep, he lies the bundle of flowers across the infant’s lap inside the cooler before quietly opening the door.

“Cora,” he cries out.

“What is it?” She asks, entering the hallway. “How was your catch?”

“I caught much more than expected,” he tells her, lugging the cooler into the kitchen before setting it on the table.

“Cora,” he says in a severe tone, “promise me you won’t go crazy.”

“Go crazy out about what, Giova?” She says expectantly.

Slowly opening the cooler, he displays the sleeping infant inside with the delicate yellow mimosas draped over him.

“Giova! What have you done?” Cora says in shock.

Later that evening, as Cora holds the cleaned-up baby, attempting to feed him the goat's milk, Giovanni sits thinking of the mother.

How will I tell him what happened to his mother? How will I look at his little face and tell him the story?—Once upon a time—

I abandoned your mother and many other people.

I followed procedure.

Your lives amounted to 3,000 Euros.

But your mother knew better; she knew your life was worth so much more.

She threw you on my boat like you were Sargon of Akkad or Moses on the Nile.

Like Rhea Silvia, your mother cast you adrift on my vessel to be suckled by the she-wolf.

That is your story, little one.

Perhaps, someday, you will be a king to lead your people.

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