



WHAT GOOD IS LOVE?

Jill Crawford

AUD HAS TO WORK so Benji goes alone, in a huff, to drink mimosas and eat smoked salmon at his old flatmates' house in Watertown, where he lived through the end of his studies into this first year as visiting assistant professor without a whiff of tenure, where he lived until she came to him across the growing Atlantic. On his return from brunch to Calvin Street, she's sitting at the drop-leaf kitchen table, earbuds in, staring out of a cobwebbed window.

SHE IS LISTENING to Dinah Washington's "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?" while watching above the rim of her laptop as the neighboring couple, who of late ripped open the scrappy earth and stowed things in it, tend to their dizzying garden, which looks like a drug-induced hallucination, engorged with movement and gaiety. She does not move at the noise of the cowbell that clangs when Benji enters. From behind, he worms his arms around her ribs and nuzzles one side of her neck under the earlobe. He presses his mouth to her cheek and she flinches. A scent of fish lingers on his breath. She knows what it is he wants.

Won't you wash first? she asks.

He shrugs and walks away.

She calls after, through the archway, into the next room: I'm sorry, baby, but it's slightly gross. He doesn't speak, just unlatches the piano lid, rubs the edges of his mouth with his fingertips, drags his hand through his beard and hair. Her stomach twists. Off he goes again into that other place of his. She cannot work, just watches him with an eye. He never let her see the murk inside him, not until he got her neat inside his life

and distant from her own, which she seems somehow to have sacrificed without realizing. She did it as if she were born and raised to renounce herself. Was she raised to renounce herself? Not deliberately. But he has the power, or he seems to have the power; and because of this power he's not always nice anymore. She feels less without knowing why.

Benji wipes his hands on his sweater. He smears the keys of the piano as he plays, over and over, the theme music from *Death in Venice*. Or is it *Brief Encounter*? Something lugubrious and ardent. He's feeling awfully hard done by and sorry for himself. She's denied him what he's owed. He's pounding into his piano instead of into her. Is it because of his father or mother? Is it because he hasn't sisters? Because he's Roman Catholic or an academic? Because he's American? Anyway, she doesn't get it. His mood saturates the house. He drags like an anchor through her stomach.

What's that tune again? she says at last.

Mahler, he mutters, and changes to something else.

And this one? she asks, lightly, after a while. Won't you play the tune I love?

He played it in Paris the morning after the first night they fucked, played it while she showered in his cold and dirty flat near Bastille. His music had fretted beautifully at the wall while she cleaned her teeth with toothpaste and the tip of her index finger. In the cabinet above the bathroom sink, she'd discovered his inhaler, hidden behind a colossal bottle of mouthwash. She warmed to the covert fragility. Perhaps that was when she chose him.

Come on, baby! she teases. Play it for me. Please.

I don't feel like it.

He closes the lid, stands up from the piano stool. He is the king of huffs. There's something domineering in the huffing of an adult. Though she can still smell that smell that makes her want to puke, she follows him into the living room. He's seated in the armchair by the potted tree, reading Gilles Deleuze. She hasn't read Deleuze but is aware that Deleuze, like Benji, had problems breathing. In Paris, where they met, Benji took her on a pilgrimage to the flat, or the pavement outside the flat, where Deleuze ended his life. On the way home, along boulevard Saint-Michel, they watched a man and a woman post a small boy through a slit into the belly of a clothes bank, where the boy was expected to forage. He didn't look hesitant. He dove and wriggled in.

The boy's father held the mouth of the clothes bank open while the mother reassured her child through the chink.

She hovers by the arm of Benji's chair, rubbing a leaf of their rented olive tree between her fingers. The little branch stretches to her.

He looks up from *Logique de la sensation*.

Look, I'm sorry, she says, but I can't have sex with a man who smells of smoked fish.

It's my body and I'll do what I want with it, he replies.

I know and respect that it's your body.

She sighs. This has been going on since she flew in three months ago and they moved into the new place. He begged her to come. I can't live without you, he said. On her arrival, he met her at Logan International with flowers, his hair shoulder-length in a ponytail, yet another fad at 35. She said nothing about the hair, which he kept taking down and tying up in a rubber band till she lent him a snag-free bobble.

She impales him with her eyes: You are free to do what you want with your body, but if you do what *I* want with it, I'll do something for you.

He looks back, meek: You're a scoundrel.

Yes, I can be.

UPSTAIRS, HE RUNS HIMSELF a bath and unwraps a new packet of the soap he likes, Roger & Gallet, not wishing to grapple with the tadpole sliver that would slip from his hands. He sets the big smooth bar on the rim, steps in and perches, his feet hopping in sharp heat. He lowers himself, inhales and exhales steam, watches his pubic hair plump, his cock. He can guess what she meant, knows at once what he wants—he'll work up to that. Start simple, foreseeable, with lingerie. He'll ask her again for photographs for when they are apart, or to go to that "salon" he has mentioned only once so far. No, he wants to bathe with her, since she never lets him, always locking the door to keep him out, saying it's *a time for her*, which makes him jealous. He wants inside her every part. What's the point, otherwise?

He heads downstairs with sodden hair, towel about his groin. The basement door is open, and he can hear as the washing machine rattles, subdues, halts. Clunk of the door latch. A gentle collapse of contents into the yellow plastic washbasket, which has been in the family since he was a baby, the first son of sons. Here on the piano he keeps a photograph

of his mother. She looks like a teenager—though she's only ten years younger than he is now—devoutly holding him in her arms. They had not yet come to America.

Aud clips up the basement steps with an armful of damp washing, face and torso concealed behind the mound, so he can only see arms and legs. He bolts the door behind her; she is scared of the basement.

Don't you open that trapdoor, he chants, cos there's something down there.

This is an allusion to a children's TV show she watched years ago and has shown to him on YouTube. They share a laugh at her expense.

She drops the pile on the dining table, where the cloth puffs and slumps: Shut up! she says.

As he fishes socks from the twisted heap, dangling them over backs of dining chairs, he watches her. She drapes heavy bed linen off doors. The hinges wince.

He moves close, pushes himself against her, revolves her around, eye in eye, mouth on mouth. Her freed hands skim across ribs to the small of his back, nestling there. The towel falls. He splays a hand against her breastbone, presses until she's curving back, holds her upright with his other hand on her spine, tugs at her bottom lip with his teeth.

I want, he says.

The fight is done. A duvet cover slithers off a door as they fuck on the sofa, curtains undrawn.

AFTER THEY ARE FINISHED, he says: I suppose I should take you out for dinner. Put on a pretty dress?

They go out for dim sum, smelling of each other's scent, but he has forgotten his wallet and she has to pay, which irritates her, which unravels him. He broods, striding home ten paces ahead, shoulders hunched, head set forward, casting back dark glances, wounded, *glowering*. Before being with Benji, she never saw a face eclipse for no good reason. This grim sulk will persist until tomorrow or the next day or the day after that. But he's always mislaying his belongings. She bought him a woollen scarf that he left at the yoga studio on its first trip out, going back to retrieve it when reminded and bringing home a different scarf, assuming it was the same. She had taken care in choosing that scarf in colors to suit him, albeit in the Irish shop in departures at Dublin Airport. It had cost her forty euros.

This scarf is from Scotland, she'd said. The one I gave you was from Donegal.

He's a pond into which things drop, vanish. He hates when she calls him the absentminded professor, sensing a prick in it. Do all Ivy League academics possess reverent, pragmatic spouses who manage the boring earthly acts of clothing and cleaning and child-rearing and pleasing that they might occupy themselves in probing knowledge? Bright souls can't wash a dish! His oblivion is self-serving, chosen, though bred into him as well. As a teenager, he was thought too rare and gifted to waste time on a Saturday job. What is it to only ever have been a pupil and a teacher, never to have served or had a boss? How on earth did she miss how delicate he was? He hid it well. He seeks, she thinks without awareness, to make an angel of her, an angel like his mother. I'm not your fucking angel, she wants to say. Don't you see that it has taken more to get me here than it took for you to get where you are? She cannot fit the emotion into words, doesn't yet know how. She loves him. He's the closest she has found. Is this the cost? Ah, she thinks too much. She must strive for softness. Other women, her friends, seem happier, more forgiving—perhaps one because the other. He behaves like this when she's pigheaded. He's tender otherwise.

At home, he ascends to the spare room. There he will spend the night alone. In the morning, he'll let her curl her body around him.

DURING THE NIGHT he comes in, which he's never done midargument. The bed heaves as he slips under, close. I hit a wall, he whispers. I'm here, she breathes, unsealing and resealing her eyes. They sleep, taking turns to hold each other's body, determined that, if they go down, they'll go together. She cannot let him go.

HE WAKES FIRST and brings up tea and buttered toast. When he proposed to her, he said: I'll make you breakfast every morning.

No way. Every morning? I don't believe you.

Every morning of every day for the rest of our life. I'm not fucking around.

Toast with marmalade? she'd teased. The vow was no less touching for being improbable.

Je t'aime. He kisses her now, his mouth fresh with spearmint, camomile. He's brushed his teeth.

Je t'aime, she murmurs, kissing back, stopping her own breath at the throat.

It's not always easy, he says. Sometimes I forget how.

I agree. We'll learn. We'll get better at it.

But it's passed. He gently dislodges some sleep from her eye.

So dumb. Let's pretend it never happened. Deal?

Today will be back to normal.

When he moves within her, they're nearly whole and innocent again. Yet at times, she glimpses a frantic tinge of yearning in his face that wasn't there before—or else she didn't apprehend it. Then he has the panicked eyes of a man who's clutching at something that's slipping from him, the loss inevitable. This struggle's his, she thinks. The abyss is beneath or in him.

THE APPETIZER IS SQUID they were meant to cook the night before. It oozes from limp plastic, plops onto the chopping board. They gaze at it, mauve and gray, slack and fetid. The reek of it catches in her throat. He coughs, swills some beer in his mouth. She squirms at his shoulder as he dissects it, crumbs it, and strikes a match to light the cooker.

You needn't think I'm eating that, she says.

It won't hurt you. Don't be fussy. He frowns, sets the matchbox on the chopping board. It slithers across goo.

Watch, will ye! She lifts the matchbox, rubs it with kitchen roll. The box is red, black, and white, an elephant inside two spheres. One corner is all blotched now. She tuts: Please use the gas lighter.

He shrugs: Look, they'll be here soon.

I told you these matches aren't cheap. They're mostly for decorative purposes, the odd candle. I have to order them from the special shop. Did what's-her-name text?

Not yet. She'll be getting in from the airport. The others are coming at eight.

Hope they're not early. I made up her bed, laid out a towel. Will she mind sleeping on the mattress? Should we give her our room?

No, he says. He takes salami out of the fridge, peels away paper as he crosses back, slams it on the chopping board, soots the surface with flour, carves into the flecked pork with the slimy knife. He holds out a piece: You want?

You're disgusting.

He eats, cuts more. A thick coin of marbled purple slithers across the counter and over the lip to the floor. He scoops it up, gobbles. Five-second rule, he says.

She stares at the tiles that haven't been mopped since they moved in: Are you looking for food poisoning?

Don't believe in it, he replies, setting his bottle back on the squid stain.

Don't put that there. She can just see him, spreading it throughout the house.

What, like this? He lifts the bottle, drinks, replaces it on the goo. I don't endorse your obsessive fixations, he says, turning back to his spitting pan, tossing in a ring and tentacle to test the oil's heat.

Charlotte arrives at last, via Uber, straight off the flight, fashionable, strangely neat, with a hard little mouth.

WHEELING HER CASE into the hall, Charlotte accepts a kiss on both cheeks from Aud, whom she's seen on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn.

Sorry I didn't get around to bringing something, she says. Where is he?

He's in the kitchen, Aud replies. Come through.

Aud's voice is huskier than Charlotte expected, and she's thinner too, surprisingly tall. She doesn't seem to take a lot of pride in her appearance.

Thanks for putting me up, Charlotte says.

Benj? Aud calls.

Hi, he replies. I'm stirring—critical moment. Be there in a minute.

Charlotte follows Aud up to the guest room.

Folks will be getting here soon if you want to, uh, freshen up.

I forgot to bring toothpaste and, um, tampons, Charlotte says.

Oh sure, bathroom cupboard. Help yourself to whatever.

Thanks. As Charlotte smiles, her face feels tight, as though someone were pressing flat hands hard into her cheeks.

AUD LIGHTS TEA LIGHTS in jam jars on the coffee table, windowsills, fireplace. Benji comes in. She didn't bring wine, Aud says. Who comes to a person's house for dinner without bringing something to drink? Do you think it's a German thing?

She's not German, just lives there. She's from Las Vegas.

Well, I'll have to go out and get another bottle, at least.

Look, it doesn't matter.

Nothing worse than running out of booze. That's a sin where I'm from.

I'll go.

No, I'll go. She's your pal. I don't know what to say to her.

Aud yanks on boots and the long black coat Benji hates because it's shapeless, masculine. She steps out into the brisk dark. The cowbell jangles as the front door slams—the landlady is a Buddhist.

BENJI PRESSES THE HEEL of the loaf he is baking; it doesn't bounce back. He closes it in the oven, sucks a scorched fingertip. Water is gurgling in the pipes. Charlotte is showering. He returns to his interrupted task of dabbing mushrooms clean with a kitchen towel. The bathroom latch. Her feet treading across the landing above his head. Strangled croak of the guest bedroom door. If they don't mention it, didn't happen. Charlotte moves up there awhile and comes down looking put together: lilac camisole, neat-fitting trousers, hair slicked back and still wet, careful makeup. They don't touch. He doesn't even find her that attractive.

She seems nice, another exotic, Charlotte says. Where'd you find her?

Paris, OKCupid.

Scottish?

Irish. I didn't tell her anything.

I assumed.

That bra hoists Charlotte's tits so they look bigger than they actually are. It's a cheap trick. He toughens.

But hey, he says, one transgression is no great harm in the grand scheme.

Indeed. Charlotte smiles, face tight. What're you making? She prods the sporadically bubbling risotto broth with the wooden spoon, dips her face and throat in the steam to inhale. Her chest flushes.

Bitch, that turns him on. For the first time, he wonders if he erred in offering her the guest room. He hasn't seen her since Heidelberg, maybe didn't think this through, almost forgot it happened.

It was actually several transgressions, she says, looking out of the grubby window to a string of lights in the neighboring garden. Pretty, she observes.

He can smell her.

THE OTHER GUESTS have arrived by the time Aud shuffles in with two bottles of good white. She kicks off her boots at the door, casts her mammoth coat over the staircase post. No time to change or to titivate much. She feels plain, narrow, slips up to put on lipstick.

Downstairs, Benji is seated at one end of the dining table, an empty chair to his right and left. Jesse is a no-show. Udoka and Davy are sitting opposite Charlotte and Luis. Molls is at the far end. They are discussing the humanitarian crisis in Haiti, where Udo's been working with Doctors Without Borders.

Aud, can you grab another bottle of wine? Benji calls.

Aud comes to the table with wine, takes her place between Charlotte and Benji, who dishes up. They eat, talk. First and second helpings. Then, cheese with bread and salad. Benji tells the others that Aud's family serves the cheese *after* dessert *with* coffee: horror. Aud pretends not to mind. When all the wine has been consumed, Benji delves into the landlady's liquor cabinet.

She said to help ourselves, Benji says, extracting a bottle of Bulleit. He knows she can't stomach whiskey.

CHARLOTTE HEADS OUTSIDE for a smoke while Aud clears the plates. The cowbell jangles as Charlotte opens the door. Nobody comes with her. She leaves the door ajar to feel part of things. After she's stubbed out, she heads up to the bathroom to wash her hands. She can't stand the stench once the pang is gone. She takes a tampon from Aud's bathroom cupboard, unpeels it, pees, and reads Aud's framed autographed photo of Luke Perry from *Beverly Hills, 90210*:

To Áidrí, Love and peace,
LP xo

What, did he ask her to spell out the freakin' name? Earnest people give her the creeps.

BY MIDNIGHT, everybody else has gone. School day tomorrow, Aud says, cling-filming leftovers, pongy cheese.

Benji lifts glasses, sets them in the sink.

Charlotte needn't help, Aud insists: Sure, you don't know where anything goes. And you've a big day ahead, presenting a paper at Harvard. What an honor!

When Charlotte has gone up, Aud comments: I'm surprised you can be a professor of African American studies and be white.

Soon after, they follow, moving between bedroom and bathroom, undressing, brushing teeth, trying not to make noise.

THE HALL LIGHTS GO OFF, a mattress strains. Whispers and the quiet of fucking, got to be. Charlotte gets up, nude, and opens the wardrobe, steps in, angles an ear near the wall to listen, taking care not to rustle the cheap wire hangers. She opens the bedroom door, which squeaks. They'll hear that. In the bathroom she pees, runs the tap to remind them she is here. The window sash is wedged up to let in four inches of navy air. Outside in the night, a low noise of crickets.

THEY FREEZE AND WAIT until all is still. Aud blows in Benji's ear. Tell me? she says.

I want her to stand at our door and listen, he whispers. I want to call her in. She's at the foot of the bed. You go and stroke her legs, kiss her belly. She pushes you back, rough, crawls over. I watch, I watch, see you rippling together. You stroke her with your fingers and she takes me in her mouth and I kiss you while her little tits dangle in my hands.

Aud comes, then Benji comes inside her.

BACK IN BED, Charlotte listens to the languid afterward, drops a hand to pulse, pinches a nipple, comes without a sound, sleeps.

CHARLOTTE WAKES EARLY to read through her talk.

Breakfast is on the worktop: granola, rye bread, Bonne Maman apricot preserves. She's can't-eat-nervous and wearing a very snug pencil skirt, sheer stockings, heels—maybe trying too hard, but he likes it when women dress for him, something Aud doesn't seem to realize.

Benji appears and brews coffee, barely looks her way.

You should come to Germany for Oktoberfest, Charlotte says. You could stay in my guest room, both of you.

Thanks. Maybe we will. We're getting married.

Wow, Charlotte says. When did that happen?

A few months ago.

You've kept that quiet. Before Heidelberg?

When I got back.

How long have you been together?

A year and a half, long-distance.

Quick.

I want her here with me.

Shouldn't you give her a ring?

She won't wear one till I do. Shit, I'm gonna be late for class.

You haven't told people yet? I mean, nobody mentioned it last night.

No, we have. Our families. I just don't want to make a *thing* of it.

Worried about who might come out of the woodwork?

He ignores this: She'll be up soon.

I'll stick around to congratulate.

Don't bother. Well, good luck today. Maybe see you in Heidelberg, or at a wedding, right?

Benji leaves via the back door. Through the window, she watches as he unlocks his bike from the porch and exchanges a friendly word with the neighbor, who pauses at weeding. When Benji took his cock out to show her, he presented it as a trophy, like a proud boy showing off what he possessed. He couldn't stand for her not to know, fucked her as if he believed it was the one thing he was great at. No, he couldn't give that up, can't help it. He left her feeling restless, scooped out. There is no such thing as a neutral exchange; people give or take.

Charlotte is standing at the foot of the stairs. Above her, on the ceiling, a gray box winks. Her head swirls. She doubles forward and grips the banister's solid spoke as her stomach churns. She kneels on the first step. The carpet here is spare. It burns her knees. Her throat is pulsing like a frog's, her belly seething—something wants out. She seems to be a well, and baling twine is pulling up a rattly bucket. She creeps up the stairs, inch by inch, with limbs that are inexact, not hers, or rather her own not working with her, feeble and achy. Up she slithers to the top. Her ears echo. Aud is fast asleep and she's in Aud's home, sliming across the cold floor to the toilet. She tips up the seat. From the bedroom Aud will hear everything. She hovers over, lips open, gut pumping—to get what out? She gags, tries to gather herself, quietly spews over the toilet, splashing the seat, wall, floor, cistern, side of the bath. She spews again,

specking hair and cheeks, her fingers webbed with saliva, acidic and foamy, muddled stuff. She'll never drink again, though she didn't drink that much. Impossible to stave off this loneliness.

Charlotte, you okay?

Aud's shadow is under the door. She didn't hear her move.

Uh, no, Charlotte says.

Can I help? I'll bring you some water. I can leave it here by the door.

Aud pads down to the kitchen.

Charlotte checks the lock. Thank god she didn't vomit all over the stairs. She yanks out ribbons of toilet paper, rolls her hand in them, squelches the wadding across puddles, spots. The spiral and bubble of the flush makes her want to puke again. She can do nothing but lie on her back on the floor in the reeking bathroom, her body a conundrum to her, always wanting and erring. When dizziness settles, she rolls onto her front, crouches in a ball. It doesn't mean anything.

But Aud is not alone, is she? Not crawling over Charlotte's floor, emptying out her insides? No, Aud is leaving a glass of water by the door. Aud does not need an engagement ring. Aud wants things to feel equal. What planet does this girl live on? How'd she get to be so hopeful, simple? Charlotte wishes she were less intelligent; it's a distorting gift, a perversion. She drags herself up to the toilet bowl again, coughing out bile and flotsam until there's nothing left in her but fumes.

I think you need a doctor, Aud says, when the deluge subsides. I'll call someone.

Charlotte sighs, exhausted, a husk.

Do you want me to phone the conference people?

I can't do it.

I know. I'll tell them you're sick.

They flew me here. I'm fucked. Charlotte hasn't cried in ages.

You can't help it.

A glob of drool falls out of Charlotte's mouth. Her throat is raw, lining bruised and jagged. She retches vainly. Nothing's left.

Sorry, she says, her voice a scorched wisp, a creak.

What crappy timing! If you open the door, I'll help get you into bed. You can lie in our room. It's closer.

My tights, Charlotte says. Her tights are pulled, flecked with fibers, smut.

We'll change your flight, Aud says. You can stay a bit longer.

Don't tell Benji!

Of course, not yet. Aud goes into her bedroom, comes back out: Who should I call to cancel?

It's in my phone. We texted yesterday. The code's, um, 2046. Dr. Olawale.

AUD RETURNS to the bedroom and texts Benji:
C is vomiting What if we poisoned her?
I'm fine. We ate the same thing. You?
I didn't eat the squid What do I do?
Don't tell her about the squid. Pharmacy? Am tied up with seminar.
Can you come at lunch? I've a meeting Don't feel right abandoning her
Dunno. Can you reschedule?
Fuck Benj, that's not fair!
Your work's more flex. We're a team, no?
Will phone the doc
Chicken soup?
Ye kidding? I don't like touching raw chicken
Don't be a wimp.
Fine You're cleaning the bathroom See you asap, yes?
Home by 7.
7!
Sorry, baby, best I can do.

BENJI'S OFFICE HOUR has been uneventful—even the suck-up didn't show today. He flicks through webpages: on Rate My Professors, a new review calls him *funny*. It's not a word he'd have used. He suspects it was written by one of the two girls who sit at the front of the class, occasionally braless, bare legs. They try to fluster him. When he's getting off, he sometimes pictures the taller one with the slow eyes. She can't be more than 20. Oh, he's really not that guy, but it doesn't hurt to think about it. He's been given a red chili for hotness. He looks up his colleagues. He can't fathom how Jonathan Delgado got a red chili. Jonathan Delgado just got tenure at Columbia, but he's an aberration, a genius like Benji's father, born that way, hardly deserves credit.

He goes through his mail. There's a postcard from the quiet Native American kid to thank him for the extra lessons. It felt good to help someone for no other reason than to help someone, not thinking about oneself

for once. He'll do half an hour of Catullus and some marking before class starts. After that, he'll mull the Charlotte problem. Would have liked to have swum before dinner; that's fucked. Where will he get tenure? He wants them to stay on the East Coast, not end up in Nowheresville.

He sends Aud a thoughtful WhatsApp:

If we have a baby girl I'd like to name her Laure?

Laure's sweet, she replies.

Wish it could happen by accident.

Fuck sake, Benj You don't make a mistake You decide A child is an epic responsibility

Just saying.

And apart from Auntie Lil, my fam' are miles away

We'd work it out. Mom would come help.

Have to go At Wholefoods, buying chicken

Benji locks his door, takes his phone off Wi-Fi, and flicks onto YouPorn, Teen category. They're probably not teenagers, though they look fresh, beautiful. He takes a quick five, *time for him*. If Aud were to let him have pictures, he wouldn't look at porn as often. She says no, because of Jennifer Lawrence—what if? They are getting hitched and she doesn't trust him yet. Charlotte sent him a photo.

When Aud plucks the wiry black hairs from the moles on his back, she claims: This is my expression of love. I'm grooming you.

Like an ape?

Yip, like an ape.

Ow. That hurts!

If we ever split, she said recently, you'll tell your next woman your wife did this, and she'll think I was cruel, and you'll hate me for it.

We won't split, he replied. I want you forever.

Once they are married, he'll try, really try, to wind down the porn, and he must stop sleeping with other women. He discussed it with his mother and his married brother. He told them everything, or enough. They were surprised but agreed that what she doesn't know won't hurt, best not to come clean, she doesn't need to know. Honestly, he would rather unburden. Except for these fitful scraps that don't count, he tells her everything. But he can't be too hard on himself, his mother said: he needed, he needs, and now he's suffering. And if he can't ever tell her, he'll suffer indefinitely. That's a sizable sacrifice to make for any person. He'd do anything for Aud, to keep her. He doesn't really have her yet.

He needs them to have a child. Things will be clearer then. He should text Charlotte:

Hey, sorry you're ill. Hope A is helping out. B

SOME BOYS ARE SAUNTERING up ahead as Aud walks back from the supermarket. They wear backpacks. One has a rolled-up towel under his arm. Their heads are damp. They push each other, talk loudly, speaking rubbish. One leaps to swipe the branches of a magnolia tree. One's keen to show the others something, asks his friend to call him. They crumple into whoops and giggles as the phone croons and whimpers, making sexy noises. They are about 11, wee boys who haven't had their growth spurts. At the traffic lights, the kid with the towel says bye and the others wave, go on. His mum rounds the corner in an SUV. An older girl is up front. He climbs into the back seat, slams the door, which doesn't shut properly. His mum looks back, hasty, tells him to do it again. Again, the door does not close tight. His sister has to hop out and do it for him. Once their seatbelts are clasped, the car goes.

AUD STOPS AT THE CROSSING and sets down her shopping bag. It's heavy: roast chicken, Pepto-Bismol, club soda, loo roll, bleach, and oranges. She stretches her achy arm. It's too early to be sure. She doesn't feel anything yet. Wouldn't she feel something by now? Every body is different, reacts differently. Please don't let it be yet. She isn't ready, they aren't ready. She should have told Benji. She can't.

Hale, vivid flowers have come up through chinks in the pavement, as if they were needle-hard instead of yielding stem, sepal, petal, so craving the sensation of sun, wind, dust, winged things that they've pierced the tarmac and swollen to crack it open. Her mother would know these flowers. Her folks are far away. Maybe it will be all right. Fishing in her pockets, she pulls out her iPhone to take a photo to send to her mum, ask her about the flowers. Shit, she's lifted Charlotte's phone, too.

CHARLOTTE IS LYING on Aud's bed. Nearby a train streaks past, hauling her out of sleep. Her limbs are heavy. Her bra is squeezing her ribs. Breath won't sink deep inside her, barbs in her throat. An insect hums against the mesh of the small square window, wanting in. Otherwise, the room is bare, peaceful, a faint smell of dust. She doesn't want to go home yet.

BEFORE HE HEADS to the seminar, Benji pokes about in his desk for the bottle of Xanax his mother gave him, since he hasn't been sleeping well. He swallows three capsules with the dregs of the morning's coffee.

AUD OPENS THE TEXT to Charlotte from Benji. She scrolls up the chain of messages they've exchanged. Under her breastbone, there's a lump of cold dough. When she finds the photo, sound falls out of her ears, a hand flies to her mouth. She drops to her knees on the pavement. No—she gets to her feet, bolts back in the direction of the shop, away, anywhere, gripping Charlotte's phone. She stops, twists around, goes back, twists again, keeps going. She. She doesn't know what. Her knees hurt, she will not cry. This is not her story. This is not it. She walks into a warm coffee shop, walks straight out again. Everything she's doing is a cliché—excruciating. She is not this person. Where should she go? She doesn't have anyone here. Her shopping bag waits on the pavement at the crossing. The chicken is cooling in its foil pouch. Its salt skin puckers in congealed juice. She rings Auntie Lil in New York.

Can I come? I'll catch the train tonight.

Of course, Lil says. I'm in Patagonia, but Raúl will let you in.

Thank you. You're saving my bacon.

You know, Lil says. This is not a death.

ON RIVERSIDE DRIVE, over Skype, she listens as he spills. Sobbing, he tells her of the two, three, five, nine women he's fucked since saying that she was his person, since asking her to love him and have their children. She senses there were more. How many women, men? Does he know how not to lie? Strange encounters come to mind—at Harvard Square by the newsstand, in Trina's Starlite Lounge—each woman stunned to meet her, disturbed that she existed. Now she sees it all. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Her eyes stored each encounter to taunt her over what she missed. Her fingers pick at stickers on pomelos in her aunt's fruit bowl. She can't stay here. She digs a nail: the scent of acrid, soapy rind. Quite young, she was told, *It'll fall to you to say no*. That, she'd thought, was the olden days. She said yes and watched herself being taken over, slowly altered, having invited Benji in, at first innocent, then complicit.

I'll do anything, he pleads, when all's supposedly confessed.

She opens the fridge and cracks a beer. A sip won't do any harm. It hurts to see his pain, a chord between them still. Could she stay and give him a chance? People aren't one thing. She isn't perfect. It doesn't have to make sense.

He says: I can't be too hard on myself because I hated lying to you and I've suffered a lot. There's relief in his expression.

When did you last have sex? she asks. Was it in our house? Is she still there?

His face malfunctions. He looks caught.

Ha. A memory trickles and she bursts, shielding her mouth with her hand, laughing, laughing.

What? he asks.

There's spittle on her keyboard, small bubbles on the screen.

Uncertainty in his face, he smiles.

She drops her hand and shakes her head: Do you remember kissing on that street corner by *métro* Parmentier after eating in the specious Brazilian place?

Oh, the bum? He snickers.

Yeah, the bum with the bum—ludicrous. She's suddenly crying. She gasps: I should've known then that this was a joke to you.

Aud, I'm so sorry.

Why?

I don't know. I don't even know. He sighs and looks inside her instead of at her, and she almost recognizes him. I tried, he says. I can't explain it. I got lost. It got worse and worse till I couldn't feel. I did it and I couldn't tell you, or undo it, or make it better without telling. From the first time, the first mistake, it was over, I'd spoiled it. I thought I could pretend it hadn't happened and it would, well, you wouldn't know, and I'd never do it again. Lots of people do that. But I felt terrible, terrible. Lying was painful. I was so angry. I mean, I wanted to forget or fix it, but I couldn't. I kept doing it. There was no escape. I couldn't look at you without seeing myself, how ugly I'd made it. Your lovely trusting face was torture. I didn't know what to do. I don't. I love you. I'm drowning, Aud. I'm drowning.

Stop. I can't bear to listen to this. You're not a victim here.

I'm just sick of suffering and hiding from you. I've lived you like a dream.

For fuck's sake, Benji. I'm real, I've always been real. Catch yourself on. You wanted me and her and everything you wanted. And you felt, you feel, you still feel, that you are entitled to that. Don't you? Don't you? What makes you think that way? You're just a man. You thought you'd get away with it. Own up.

You're wrong, he says. Shit . . .

What?

Light's coming up outside. I have to sleep.

Are you serious?

He smears his hands across his eyes. Can we do this later? Please. I've work soon. I'm exhausted.

Fine, she says. It'll be a pig of a day.

IT'S ALMOST SIX. She shuts her laptop. He doesn't get it. He only knows how to feel for himself. She hates him. She intends to hate him. He's coiled about himself. Why did no one teach him that lies eat indiscriminately? Every grown-up knows that.

She walks across the apartment and looks out through the three large windows that face New Jersey. Madness. The daybreak's honey, tangerine, magenta. How did he not know that? Is he warped, stunted, doolally? Madness. She's so fucking tired, so full and empty, so everything nothing. But she's away and she'll never go back because it wouldn't make sense. Could she go back? She hates him. She's never loved anyone so much. What if she never loves anyone as much? She unlatches a window that is really a door. A gust pushes in like a person who's dying to enter to get something done. Madness. Once it was precious. It really was unlike anything. How did they mess up something so good? It was hard to remember since they'd gone all King Lear.

She looks down from the seventeenth floor. Down down down down down down down down down down down down—no, she'd never do that. Not judging though, not judging, just not the genre of person, doesn't have it in her, more the type to choose to die gradually if it came to despair. The river's a very delicate pink, the shade that dishwater goes when you wash a knife with which you've sliced beetroot. It's so pretty she could howl. Her Skype rings.

If it's him, and it is him, then it's too late and too early. She won't answer. No, he's lovely and she hates him. She'll kneel down here and have a little violent sleep on the carpet and then, and then, and then,

she'll pee and stay or go back, go back or stay or go. Madness. If only she could hear only what was in her head and not feel anything, she'd be mended. Her phone keeps buzzing. Why is she still worried about him? She plucks the phone from a crevice in the couch and throws it out of the window that's a door, down down down, bending her head over the rosy indelible emptiness, watching the phone fall, checking that it doesn't hit some innocent person. What if he calls again? So what. The pavements are lonely anyway.

She draws her head back in and shuts the door and shivers. She rubs her eyes. What did she expect? Dinah warned her all about it. But she didn't hear when she was listening. Dinah Washington is always singing, always fantasizing about the awful glowing madness that scatters through your life and makes no sense and makes sense utterly. He's wrong and she's wrong and it's wrong and everything's wrong. It's the only blazing thing and impossible at the same time. Now she knows. Now she hears. Now she's alive. And what will she do now that she's raw energy? Not everything she had is gone if there's a child. And does she really have to tell him there's a child? Better to keep a child apart from a greedy, fragile liar. And yet he had such promise. What a relief!

She takes the stairs down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down to the foyer and the sidewalk and the corner and another corner. She keeps walking, all the way to where she is going. When she gets there, she buys a cheap mobile phone—pay as you go. She heads to the next place, a pharmacy. When she comes out, the siren goes off. She runs up Broadway, hoping they'll run after her, though she didn't steal. Nobody bothers, lazy fucks.

Back in the apartment, she sets up her new phone, locates the number, and calls, but there's no answer. She texts:

Hey, you in town?

She hasn't seen Dev since he left Belfast, what, five years ago. She runs a bath and steeps, het up, high, electrified, pure disgust in her veins. After nearly an hour, the phone pings. She wipes away the condensation with a hand towel.

Who this?

It's Audrey

His reply comes within a minute: *Where?*

Here. She shares her location. *Let's go dancing.* +