

She opened the red front door, stepped into the crisp air, and her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She smelt charred wood with small traces of weed. She walked down the four stairs from the brick building apartment, hugging a violet wool scarf loosely wrapped around her head with her right hand. Chestnut-colored tendrils framed her round face, and clear wire glasses sat on the freckled bridge of her nose to protect her eyes. Out of habit, she licked her cherry-colored top lip and tasted her own sweat. A white roasting pan balanced on her left forearm, and she gripped the warm edges as she opened the front passenger door. An unopened bottle of cold and cheap white wine rested safely on a pile of black sweaters and trousers. As she walked to the other side of her gray Prius, the dead, brittle leaves broke under her heavy Doc Martens. The narrow road was littered with palm-sized dried-out maple leaves, colors of early autumn, gradients of red, and hues of green with brown tips. As she turned the key in the ignition, she adjusted the rearview mirror to face her reflection and, with forced confidence, told the woman, looking back at her; you can do this; take a deep breath.

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With the pan resting on one arm and her fingers around the neck of the bottle, she walked up the concrete steps to his door, where the chipped green paint welcomed her to apartment four twenty-six. She tapped the door gently with the tip of her boot and let herself in by nudging the door with her hip. The room was dimly lit, and she felt her pulse in her ears.

He lay sprawled out on the hand-me-down green couch, and the glow of his phone illuminated his empty eyes. His long legs stretched across the length of the sofa, feet hung over the armrest, wearing the socks she bought him last Christmas. His facial hair had grown since she last saw him, and his curly hair hung beneath his earlobes. He smiled as he looked up at her, and their eyes locked. Hi, she whispered. She walked toward him, bent down, and kissed his forehead. He gestured to the wine bottle and the pan, unimpressed; what is all of this, he asked her.

She straightened her spine and turned around to make her way across the brown carpet in the living room until she reached the kitchen's checkered linoleum floors which separated the two

rooms. Around her, the smell of burnt coffee hung heavy in the air, and the muffled sounds from another room provided background noise in the otherwise quiet house.

White envelopes scattered across the wooden table, mostly for him; the return address was his mother's house, his credit card company, and a reminder from his dentist. She placed the pan on them and set the wine bottle beside them. She carefully unfolded the aluminum foil to reveal a cooked chicken surrounded by crisp fingerlings and slices of charred lemon that slid off the breasts with any slight movement of the pan. A flood of rosemary and thyme overpowered the burnt coffee and embedded itself into her dress. The thick layer of caramel-colored liquid splashed from side to side, and specks of black pepper swam among the bay leaves and translucent onions.

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I missed you so much, she shouted out. He laughed. It was only a month, sweetie. She turned her head to look at him and rolled her eyes at the invalidation.

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A hint of cigarette smoke lingered on his sweater, and in between each kiss, she asked him a new question: what was it like—did you make any friends—how did you leave things with her? Simone, he sighed, not now.

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It's late, he said as he stood up; let's go to bed. They walked hand in hand as she followed his lead across the hallway to his bedroom door. Clothes covered the floor, and a pile of books sat neatly next to the frameless bed. He lunged toward the bed, landed on his back, and his body bounced when it met the mattress. She removed her glasses and bent to place them on the gray table beside the bed. Come here, he demanded with a smile. He took her hands and pulled them

toward the bed until they found their place on either side of his head. Kiss me. She smelt the sour beer on his breath as he opened his mouth to welcome her tongue.

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They lie beside one another, naked, and he drifts between consciousness. Sweat dripped from her breasts, down her ribcage, and decorated the scratchy blue sheets.

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She coughed, and he opened his eyes. I'm happy, he assured her. I'm happy to be home with you. She turned her head to the left and watched his chest rise and fall with each breath. His dark hair danced from small puffs of wind that poured in from the window. She reached to stroke his cheek with the pad of her thumb, the short hairs bent under the pressure. She switched her gaze from his chest, past the small silver hoop in his ear, and up to his curly brown hair, now matted to his head. You're with me now, she whispered, as a tear slid down her cheek.

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At the restaurant, they sat in silence next to each other. He pulled his phone out from his pants pocket and unlocked it. 8-7-9-1, her birthday.

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She pulled her jacket taut around her body as the wind whistled and the cold autumn air bit every part of exposed skin—the tips of her ears, her cheeks and her nose, the inch of her bare legs between the cuffed trousers and boots. He carried his leftovers, balancing a compostable coffee cup on top with the other hand stuffed deep into his pocket. They walked in silence and glanced over the dead leaves in the front yards of the tattered homes. Cars passed slowly, abiding by the speed limit enforced in this neighborhood. They walked in sync side by side while their bodies refused to touch.