

Weight

2022

Her teeth break through the croissant's flaky skin and burrow into its buttery interior. Warmth spreads through her. She closes her eyes. Between coursework and TAing, she'd spent the day editing her dissertation – hours of blinking cursors, bitten nails, and chewed-up pens – not noticing that her shoulders had stealthily crept to her ears. Only inside Starbucks did she feel her body lighten, the weight of perfectionism lifted by the intoxicating rush of caffeine and sucrose. Her coffee and pastry would taste exactly as they had the day before and the day before that and the day before that. Mass-production: her patron-saint.

Her brain bloats with thoughts of her paper, her defense, her *future*, but, with effort, she smears plaster over her mind's cracking walls. It's been a month since she begrudgingly parted with \$1.99 to access unlimited content on her meditation app. Now, every night after a still-partially-frozen dinner and mediocre sex with Nick, she stuffs in her earbuds and falls asleep to the hushed murmurs of a man who, in another life, was surely a golf commentator or public radio host. *What are three things you can see? Two things you can feel? One thing you can taste?*

She scans the café, content to blend people watching with her well-intentioned yet lackluster attempts at mindfulness. *What does she see?* Barista with beanie cap and dagger tattoo; chattering tweens with metal-fenced smiles; Lulu Lemon-clad twenty-somethings who probably attend spin class and eat avocado toast and make her feel like a “before” picture – not that this is a novel feeling.

She scrutinizes the women, wondering what it must be like to have an ass that fits into size 2 leggings or breasts that require a D cup. She glances at her own pear-shaped form jutting out beneath a worn Yale sweatshirt and a torn pair of mom jeans. She carries the right amount of

weight, she supposes, just improperly distributed; her hips got too greedy, much to her breasts' chagrin.

Sighing, she takes another bite of her croissant and resumes her survey of the modellesque women. Her gaze travels across the group, and then, like a snapped rubber band, jerks back to a brunette donning a mint-hued sports bra and leggings.

She freezes, croissant hovering between mouth and plate.

Her heart stops.

Fumbling, she drops her pastry and searches for something tall, a notebook or a menu or a woman with a securely-gelled beehive. Finally, desperate, she embraces the logic of a small child playing hide-and-go-seek: *if I can't see you, you can't see me*. She squeezes her eyes shut and concentrates on her breathing, *inhale, exhale, inhale*—

“Carmen?”

She opens her eyes.

And she's sixteen again.

“Natalie!” she croaks.

“Oh my God!” says Natalie, brushing aside a strand of hair with a freshly-manicured hand. “I thought it was you! Small world, huh? How've you been? It's been ages!”

Carmen is suddenly conscious of her slouched spine and crumb-speckled sweatshirt. Brushing off the crumbs and lengthening her spine as inconspicuously as possible, she manufactures a chuckle.

“Ages,” she parrots. She stares at Natalie for five seconds before remembering she'd been asked a question. “Oh, I'm fine,” she says hurriedly. “Busy writing my dissertation. And you? You do well? You're *doing* well?” she corrects herself, warmth blossoming in her cheeks.

Natalie grins, her blue eyes gleaming. “I’m doing great,” she says. “I’m here on a girls’ trip with some college friends. I just started as a paralegal at a firm back home and I’m loving it, but it’s nice to get away from the legalese every now and again, you know?”

Carmen nods stupidly like a jacked up bobblehead.

“So exciting about your dissertation, by the way,” Natalie says. “Not surprised you went the academic route. You were always brilliant, even back in high school.”

“Thank you,” Carmen says.

Natalie clears her throat. “I’d better head back,” she says, “but it was good to see you.”

“You too,” Carmen replies, then watches Natalie reunite with her friends and, latte in hand, exit the café.

She looks at her plate. The glossy crust of her croissant now appears waxy and congealed. Remarkable how something she once found so appetizing could suddenly curdle her stomach. No longer hungry, she abandons the Starbucks, her paradise of predictability breached.

When she gets back to her apartment, she finds Nick lying on the couch, ears covered by headphones and thumbs clicking away at his gaming console. The thud of the door behind Carmen snaps Nick out of his demon-slaying trance. He pauses the game and turns toward her. His smile thins.

“Who died?” he asks.

“What?”

“Your face,” he says. He sets aside his console and gets up, leaving a Nick-shaped imprint on the worn grey cushions. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She doesn’t reply. Then, not meeting his eyes, she whispers, “I have.”

Carmen stares at the dead pig. Far from the vibrant pink of its living relatives, the creature's body is drained of color, like a piece of over-chewed bubble-gum.

Taking shallow mouth-breaths to avoid gagging from the formaldehyde, she places the scalpel on the animal's stomach and applies pressure. Its sides flop outward, revealing a mass of coiled organs.

"It's official: I'm going to puke," Natalie says, cupping a hand over her mouth. "How can you even look at it?"

Carmen shrugs. "I don't mind so much," she says. "It's kind of amazing, isn't it? That we've all got these anatomical structures inside of us? And our hearts just know to beat and our lungs just know to expand and contract and we don't even think about it until we're staring at the insides of a fetal pig?"

Natalie chuckles, shaking her head. "Thank God you're my lab partner. You're so smart."

A bottle of champagne is uncorked inside of her, the bubbles rushing to her head and making her feel dizzy and giddy and light. She blushes. "Thanks," she says.

"Okay, you need to distract me from the dead animal being carved open under my nose," Natalie says. "What are you up to this weekend?"

"Just studying, mostly," Carmen admits, trying to keep her wavering focus on the dissection. "But I've got plans to see a movie with a friend tonight."

"Ugh, I'm so jealous! I haven't been to the movies in forever."

Her heart stammers. She imagines sitting in a darkened theater, not with Meg, but with Natalie. Natalie, with her constellation of freckles and starry blue eyes. Natalie, who bites her lip

when she's thinking and busies her slender fingers with beaded bracelets. Natalie, who greets Carmen's tangents with a smile instead of a gaping stare like the rest of her peers.

Do you want to come with? Six little words, but powerful enough to make her throat cave in. Before Carmen can muster her courage, Natalie says, "I'm going to a party tonight."

She deflates. Of course Natalie already has plans. Natalie gets invited to parties. Carmen, meanwhile, merely hears the bass thumping from her next-door neighbor's house as she hunches over her history textbook. Normally, she doesn't mind so much. Now, she minds more than anything.

But then, a miracle: "You should come!"

Carmen nearly slits the fetal pig's pancreas in two. "What?"

"To the party," Natalie says. "I'm not sure what time your movie is, but, when it's over, you and your friend should swing by! It's at Kayla's house, do you know where that is?"

"I don't really know Kayla," says Carmen, pursing her lips. Well, that isn't exactly true. Of course she *knows* Kayla Xu – *everyone* knows Kayla Xu – but she's never said word one to her. "I don't want to intrude."

Natalie makes a swatting motion. "Don't be silly. It's an open party, literally the whole school could show up and Kayla wouldn't care. Come on, it'll be fun!"

"Okay," she says, grinning.

"Yay!" says Natalie, clapping. "Give me your number and I'll text you the address."

She waits for the moment when she'll jolt awake, her body moistened with sweat and eyes clouded with the lingering fog of sleep. But no matter how many times she pinches herself,

leaving a chain of puckered red marks along her forearm, the message is still there: *Hey Carmen!*
It's Natalie. Party at 127 Underwood Ct. See you tonight!

Looking up from her phone, she stares at herself in the bathroom mirror. Dark curtain bangs over bushy eyebrows. Brown, thickly-lashed eyes. Large nose and thin lips. She's never considered herself to be beautiful, but perhaps she *could* be. She doesn't usually wear makeup – just a clear, gummy lip gloss she liked precisely because it was colorless – but she can borrow some from Meg. And she can wear that shimmery silver dress that she'd bought on an aspirational whim but was too shy to debut. She smiles at her reflection, the champagne bubbles practically lifting her off the linoleum.

Chiming over the intercom brings her back to reality. She consults her watch. Ten minutes until class starts. She locks herself inside a stall and is layering the seat with toilet paper when she hears the door swing open and a crescendo of footsteps and voices and laughter.

“—sure you're okay? You barely ate anything at lunch today.”

Kayla's voice.

“I can't eat, I'm too excited about tonight!”

Carmen's heart twitters. Natalie.

“That makes one of us,” says Kayla. “I ran into *Evan* this morning. And he said he's hoping we'll get some *quality time* at the party.”

“Oh, God. What did you say?” Natalie asks. Through the gap in the stall door, Carmen watches her lean against the sink as Kayla freshens her mascara.

“I was like, *well, I'm the host so I'll probably be busy*, but he was pretty persistent. But, Natalie, you know if there's anyone I want to spend some *quality time* with, it's Greyson, not Evan,” Kayla says.

“You just need to find someone else who can keep him occupied,” Natalie says. “You know Evan,” Natalie continues. “As long as he’s got someone to flirt with, he’s happy. It’s an ego thing. He just wants something to brag about to his stupid friends.”

Kayla nods. “You’re right. But who’s going to put up with him all night?” She frowns. “Didn’t you say you invited that girl from your bio class? What’s her name, Cameron?”

“Carmen,” Natalie corrects her. Inside the stall, Carmen’s breath catches in her throat.

“She’s single, isn’t she? And kind of a loner? I’d think she’d be thankful to have *any* guy take interest in her, even if it’s Evan Peterson. You’d be doing her a favor.”

Carmen’s features crinkle like a candy bar wrapper. She’s not a loner. She has Meg. And she likes curling up on the couch with a book, kept company by her favorite characters. She’d certainly rather spend the night reading than with Evan Peterson who routinely falls asleep during English class and snores raspily, as if he’s just downed a box of shredded wheat.

Natalie inhales sharply, sucking the air through her teeth. “I don’t know about that,” she says. “I don’t think even Evan is that desperate. Carmen’s nice, but...have you *seen* her? I don’t want to be mean, but she’s pretty big. I don’t think guys are really into the no boobs, stretch-marked ass look.”

The champagne bottle shatters and the bubbles pop.

“Ew, okay, fair point,” Kayla replies. She checks her phone. “Shit, we’d better get to class. I can’t be late, Mr. Reddy already has it out to get me.”

There’s scuffling as the girls abandon the bathroom, leaving Carmen propped up against the stall door. Natalie’s words tunnel through her brain like an earworm: *Have you seen her? She’s pretty big.*

She exits the stall. She looks at her reflection once more. This time, she doesn't see a made-up version of herself in a shimmery silver dress. She just sees *fat*.

She takes her time staring into the glass, studying herself from unfamiliar angles and with new eyes. She's always known that she's a little heavy, but so are the rest of her family members, always telling her to embrace her curvy hips and to be grateful she can exercise without her chest heaving. But parents and aunties and cousins are obligated to love you, signees of an unspoken familial contract. Now, she knows how others see her. She knows that girls judge her and that boys could never love someone like her. She turns away from the mirror, disgusted.

She retrieves her phone from her jean pocket. *Hey Natalie*, she texts, *I can't make it to the party tonight. Have fun, though.*

A response arrives in seconds: *Bummer! Another time. Enjoy your movie!*

The bell rings. She's late to class.

She leans against the cinderblock wall and slides down, down, down, until denim meets tile. She cries.

On Monday morning, she tells Ms. Jackson that she wants a new lab partner. Ms. Jackson doesn't ask why. Instead, she nods and, peering knowingly over her cat-eyed glasses, makes a note on her seating chart.

When class time rolls around, Carmen sits next to Emma Murphy. Emma doesn't pay attention in class and conveniently develops menstrual cramps – regardless of the time of month – during experiments, so Carmen will have to do all of the work by herself. She doesn't mind.

When Natalie enters the room, wrapped cozily in a pink cashmere sweater, her smile disappears as she sees Angela Wilson occupying Carmen's former seat. Cocking her head, she

scans the classroom and catches Carmen's eye. *What happened?* she asks silently. Carmen shrugs. Natalie pouts, then takes her seat.

She wants to scoff. As if Natalie *really* cares who she's sitting next to. Carmen always knew that her vision of them together was a spun-sugar fantasy. Natalie doesn't like girls. And heaven knows Carmen could never admit that she does. But she always thought Natalie liked *her*. That they could be friends. And that, with time, they could perhaps be something more.

But, surveying the shards of glass and filmy residue left where joy once bubbled inside her, she knows this was just another cotton-candy cloud passing softly overhead.

2020

Her first month on the app is horrendous: Endless photos of guys lifting their shirts to reveal their abs and women with Snapchat-filtered faces, complete with digital dog ears and flower crowns. Even worse is the construction of her own profile. Each photo becomes a war zone, a site of intense evaluation, a moral quandary. Should she include a full body shot? Would that be sexual suicide? Or would the omission thereof be deceptive? She decides to upload one head-to-toe image, mostly to avoid the inevitable looks of shock and disgust upon an in-person meeting, a mumbled *This isn't really what I'm looking for*, a bathroom trip-turned-disappearance. Her head aching and her fingers tired from swiping, she considers deleting her profile weekly.

But. She's tired of coming home to an empty apartment. Tired of curling up on the sofa with wire-handled takeout boxes and plans to re-watch *Downton Abbey*. Tired of silently falling for a pretty classmate or the handsome friend of a friend, unable to admit her feelings for fear of ridicule. And it's a lot easier to be brave behind a screen.

She doesn't delete her account.

When she sees Nick's profile – the first gym, bathroom, or car selfie-free in days – she swipes right so quickly that her finger feels whiplashed.

She doesn't expect him to like her back but, halfway through her art history lecture the next morning, her phone vibrates. She glances at it, then makes a noise somewhere between a squeak and a hiccup. Heads turn, but she doesn't notice.

Their conversations aren't creepy or awkward or soul-crushingly dull. And, a week later, they meet for coffee.

Carmen tugs at the hem of her sweater, only to notice it's peppered with snow. No, not snow...lint. Tiny, frizz-framed balls of lint. She curses. She only changed her clothes four times.

She's just finished removing the last fleck of fluff from her hemline when a voice says, "Carmen?"

She looks up and it's like a painting come to life.

"Yes, hi! Nick?" she says too quickly, standing to greet him. She extends a hand just as he opens his arms to her. They pull away. They chuckle.

"Let's compromise," offers Nick, and, clasping her hand, pulls her into a half-hug. She flushes, then returns to her seat.

He orders a hot coffee, black with two sugars. She orders an iced latte, plain and sugar-free.

She sips slowly, hyper-aware of her posture, her gestures, the cleanliness of her face. Nick, meanwhile, takes long, joyful, sloppy draughts of his drink. She smiles softly. He's cute.

She doesn't jiggle her knee or pretend to receive a phone call or bring up the weather once. Instead, she beams as he asks her about her thesis and nods, wide-eyed at her animated tangents. They talk about spirituality and cosmic energy and God. She learns about his family

and his obsession with James Joyce and zombie-hunting video games. She takes a long sip of her latte. She likes him.

They shrug on their coats and meander into the February chill. He says he'd like to see her again. She says okay. She walks to the bus station with her hands tucked in her pockets. She feels warm.

The next week, they see each other again.

The week after that, there's a world pandemic.

They like each other and they don't want to see other people, especially if intermingling is suddenly synonymous with Corona. They're in each other's bubbles.

He invites her over to his apartment.

She arrives at 7:00 with a Zoom-induced headache and a bottle of wine. He cooks her dinner and they lament the state of the world. Somehow, they get from diseased bats to Batman to Nick's comic book collection. He takes her to his room and dumps a primary-colored rainbow on his carpet. They sit on the floor and leaf through pages of speech bubbles and caped crusaders and shorts worn outside tights. Her headache is usurped by sunshine. And now he's leaning toward her and brushing the hair away from her face. And he's kissing her, softly at first, then enthusiastically, exploring her mouth and teeth with his tongue. She pulls him toward her and, feeling brave, slips a hand under his shirt, feeling the smooth skin of his back. But then he does the same. And her courage combusts.

She has never before considered the vast overlap between panic and passion, but now she occupies the very center of the Venn diagram. Her heart races, one moment from lust and the next from horror. Her breath quickens as he pulls off his jeans, then morphs into hyperventilation

as he reaches toward the zipper of hers. She moves his hand to her back and continues kissing him, imagining her body doesn't exist and she's alone with his.

He pulls away. "Is everything okay?" he asks.

Panting, she nods.

He frowns. "It's just..." he gestures at her and she's suddenly aware of the comical disparity between their states of dress, her still bundled in a sweater and jeans, him unclothed apart from his boxers.

Her heart feels like it's going to explode. She wants this, she does, but she can't, and will he? She imagines him unhooking her padded bra and yanking her jeans off her wrinkled thighs and she chokes back a sob. And there's that familiar voice slithering around her brain, nourished and thriving after all these years: *I don't think guys are really into the no boobs, stretch-marked ass look.*

"Hey," Nick says softly, sitting upright. "What's going on?"

She takes a deep breath and meets his eyes. "Nothing," she says, her eyes narrowing in focus. She wants this. She wants him. He saw her and he still picked her and he'll still want her even after her armor is shed.

She doesn't give herself time for rebuttal. She takes off her sweater, quickly and with eyes closed like she's stepping into a cold shower, then draws his body back to hers, allowing his hands to trace her spine, allowing his lips to travel down her stomach, allowing his fingers to hook around the waist of her jeans and to pull them off.

He looks at her with a shy boldness. "Have you ever...?"

She shakes her head. She shivers.

"Do you want to?"

“Yes,” she says. *No, no, no.*

She lays there, starfished and motionless, as he moves on top of her. She thinks she’s supposed to moan or gasp but all she can do is clench her body tighter, retreating into the carpet. She’s doing a bad job, isn’t she? At any minute, he’ll pull out, push away, scan her body, recoil.

He pauses. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says, almost angry at him for stopping.

“Do you want to keep going?”

She tells a half-truth: “Yes.”

Now, she moves more effortfully. She wills her muscles to unclench and she arches her back and she exhales audibly and she feels numb. But Nick’s heartrate quickens and he pushes deeper inside her and when she cries out in pain he mistakes it for passion and he moves his body faster and she squeezes shut her eyes so that he won’t see her cry and she wraps her arms around him and she prays for it to keep going and she wishes it would stop.

He grunts softly when he finishes, then lays on top of her, panting. The ceiling fan whirrs mechanically, and she watches its blades as they slice through the air, a violent merry-go-round.

“That was good,” Nick breathes, his head nestled into her shoulder. “Did you like it?”

How can she answer this question?

“Yes,” she says. After that, there’s only silence. And in the silence, there’s only the echoing voice of Natalie.

2022

She’s never allowed herself to go down this rabbit hole, but, tonight, her self-discipline and be-the-bigger-person attitude vaporize. She goes full-on Wonderland.

She finds Natalie on LinkedIn, stalks her Instagram, spends hours scrolling through posts on Facebook. With every pristine photo and curated album, she feels her blood boil. How dare Natalie be gorgeous and have friends and, from the looks of it, a devoted boyfriend? How dare she travel to Cairo and eat at five-star restaurants and shake hands with Elena Kagan? How dare she live a life of meaning and joy and weightlessness when her words have left Carmen with a permanent scar? And then, just as she's rebuilding her life, starting to move on from those vicious words, Natalie has the audacity to invade her territory and put her back in her sixteen-year-old body, weeping on the bathroom floor? She can't accept it.

She navigates back to Instagram and clicks on Natalie's profile. Jamming her thumbs onto the keys, she types without thinking, relying only on her rage. *You ruined my life.*

A response arrives in seconds: *I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.*

The world turns red.

The day you invited me to Kayla Xu's party in high school I overheard you say I was fat and unlovable in the girls' bathroom. She can barely see behind her tears. I've spent every day since doubting myself and avoiding relationships and hating my body. You kept me from the life I deserved.

She hits send.

For three minutes, nothing.

And then, her phone pings.

Oh, Carmen, the message says. I'm so sorry that I hurt you. I don't remember saying that, but I believe you and that's inexcusable.

Another ping.

I don't think you know this but I've had a life-long struggle with body image and disordered eating. In high school, I was always jealous of you; you didn't have a stereotypically thin body or tons of friends, but you were comfortable with who you were. I, meanwhile, was constantly thinking about my size and feeling less-than. If I made a comment about your weight, it was probably just me projecting my own insecurities onto you. But that's not an excuse.

A final ping.

You have always been beautiful and worthy of love, in high school and today. I hope that you can forgive me for the pain I caused you and that you can lead the life you've always deserved.

She doesn't reply. She can't.

Instead, she stares open-mouthed at the black squiggles of text, her mind reeling.

The world collapses in on itself and she finds herself adrift in a sea of what ifs. What if, when Chris Holland asked her out in undergrad, he wasn't doing so on a dare? What if the server who wrote her number on the bill with a winky-faced invitation to *call me!* wasn't doing so as a joke? What if, when her parents told her she was pretty, they weren't doing so as signees of a familial contract but rather out of conviction? She staggers backward and sits on her bed, a desperate attempt to anchor herself as her every interaction, interpreted on the basis of a single premise, is tossed into question.

She cries, and enclosed within each teardrop are years. Years of thick sweaters and declined dates and *Downton Abbey*. Years of scurrying past mirrors and closed eyes during sex and refusal to try on clothes in fitting rooms. Years of Ben & Jerry's ice cream and the ensuing guilt and a desire to be invisible.

She finishes crying. She exhales. She stands up. And she joins Nick for dinner.