

Chartreuse Couch
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When you wake up you are in the living room of the house you used to live in. The air is barely moving, but when you breathe you can see the effects of your exhaling as dust particles swirl like golden confetti in a beam of light. The light is coming from a window, high on the wall, to your right, and you realize this is a basement. That copper light—the dust—it's touching everything, and everything has turned a shade of gold, a shade of brown. The couch (you know it's green) is backed up against the wall before you like some kind of criminal, slowly fading to a burnt sienna, every fiber standing on end as if the cushions have just been vacuumed. The couch is guilty in its stains, its sags. For a moment, you see your sixteen-year-old body twisted there, a mess of flesh and sweat and firsts. But you push those tangled limbs away and forget those faces. There is a rug on the floor, braided by your mother's mother and faded by fifty years of feet. The twisted oval of beige looms like an optical illusion, those ones that make your eyes see swirls, and you shut yours.

When you open them there are two men who have the same name. They're talking but a rushing sound obscures their vowels, the rough chops of consonants disappearing into the dimly-lit room. At first you think that rushing is just blood in your ears (like when you listen to a conch shell) but then you feel the suck of mud and understand that you are sinking. Mud the color of Wonka's Chocolate River is up to your ankles, and you feel it between every toe, in every tiny pore. This reminds you of smoking weed when you don't have socks on. This reminds you how when you touch that place in the middle of the top of your foot, that place where there may-or-may-not be some kind of cyst, your foot is numb and feeling everything at the same time. That's what this mud is about.

The couch is getting muddy, and your mom won't be happy about that.

The first man is brownish gray. He is wearing shorts that are the Mojave Desert, and you watch the many waves of khaki sand until your eyes are dry and scratchy. He is your boyfriend who looks like someone you don't know. You might know the firmness of his feet, though. They are also sinking in this rush of wet dirt, and he is still saying words that you can't read. You can never read in this place. Man Two has relocated from the couch to a swivel chair. He is spinning, constantly a blur, reminding you that you are all actually underwater. You look out the window to check your hypothesis: correct. A minnow swims by, looks inside. *I can relate* you say out loud.

I've met you. You say that out loud, too. You're saying it to Man Two. *I've met you. I've met you. I've met you.* Unknown Boyfriend stops talking and lets his eyes go gray. The mud is slurping on his knees, kissing them with its big brown tongue, animated like a Saturday morning cartoon. SWIVEL. SWIVEL. SWIVEL. You look back at the chair, and the Crouched Acquaintance, who is still clean, perched like a bird above the sinking, looks back at you. He's got words all over him, crawling with a purpose that you know *means* something. You move closer, strain your

eyes, but you are conscious that the mud is slowing you down. Around your calves the river is parting, slitting into ripples that resemble the knots of a tree, undulating ovals of lichen-flecked skin. You would like to submerge; to slip your fingers through the feeling; to dive into the current with one singular, jello-like wiggle.

“Are we sinking?” you say.

“This *is* the S section of the dictionary,” Crouched Acquaintance says. His chair is gone, and he is moving toward you, his bath of words still covering him. He is his own ant hill, his own hive.

“Shit,” you say, squinting, feeling the familiar frustration of illiteracy. “I thought we had more time.” Unknown boyfriend has risen. He is covered in mud, but you think it looks kind of nice on him. It reminds you of what he’s been through. He takes Man Two by the shoulder and begins to examine the quivering body of sentences carefully. He can read them because he wears contacts, and his face looks disappointed. You feel uncomfortable about the two of them standing so close, and when you study their faces you realize that they are both wrong.

“I thought I had a fifty-fifty shot,” you say, shoving your hands into your pockets. You’re not exactly sure of what you’ve lost yet, but the feeling in your chest is in your stomach, like an animal swallowed whole inside a snake’s expanding throat.

“Oh, this is just a drop in the bucket,” your mother says. She’s walking next to you and her hair is silver in the wind. You know she’s right, but you’re not ready to admit it to her yet. Some things are just too hard to say. She plucks a word from Man Two’s lapel, and it writhes at its belly like an angleworm.

There is relief in being outside of that basement. The pines stretch up above you like yellow-green plumes, rippling their tiny fingers in a wind you cannot feel. You lay down on the dock, bent at your knees. Head against creaking, bobbing boards, your shins are still six inches into the lake. Your father is skewering that word on a thin metal hook. You hear the calculated arc of arm casting it out, the *whirr whirr* of fishing line expanding over the flood. It is morning and afternoon, and the sun is low and warm on your forehead and hands. Behind closed lids you see perfectly orange calendulas, like palms turned peach by a flashlight’s trapped light. Far out, you hear the word collide with water, and hope it drowns.