

The Moment You Step Outside

April 2022

I've always kind of adored the thought of having a lobotomy. Even prior to everything that happened, I imagined a lobotomy to be very satisfying. Having a doctor open me up and remove the offending part, leaving me awash in relief. The kind of satisfaction you only get from popping a pimple or having a bowel movement.

I've got lobotomies on my mind because my coworker Hera is complaining about a particularly obnoxious meeting she just sat through. *Just fucking lobotomize us next time*, she says, genuinely inconvenienced. It takes all my strength to offer her a polite laugh. I'm just so fucking gracious – I'm spending so much of my time consumed by thoughts of social niceties, as if Emily-Post-like courtesy can disguise my complete disengagement.

I pass the day until five P.M by holding my breath longer and longer at the start of every hour. I notice that after two minutes the pain passes, comes in waves, and is then replaced by a kind of gratifying dizziness. The reptilian part of my brain kicks in soon after and I take a gasping breath of air every time. My blood pressure plateaus when my body realises I'm not actually dying, not *really*.

At 4.59pm, I write an email to a client about their order. I think about the kilobytes wasted on this correspondence that serves no one, not even me, and how there surely must only be a finite amount of data in the universe and every email I send is contributing to its depletion. I get up and leave, awkwardly doing a little wave to my colleagues. They farewell me, mispronouncing my name.

Now I'm walking home via the pedestrian bridge. At the top, I pass by a man walking in the opposite direction. I slip the shoulder strap of my dress down my arm, revealing a sliver of my bra to him. I smile like a gargoyle. The man keeps walking, but his gaze follows me as I pass him. I sort of imagine him with those bulging-out cartoon eyes that the French skunk gets when he sees the fuckable cat. I sometimes do things like this, things that I know would make Alan

angry, because it feels nice, like pressing on a bruise. The whole ritual gives the air an electrical charge.

I think about Alan in earnest the rest of the way home. About the fact that he and I met when I was twenty-five, which is not remarkably young, except by knowing that he was forty. He had Scandinavian good looks and an angular face, and he smelt nice, like clean leather. I was pregnant with the twins within the year, and a fulltime mother before my twenty-seventh birthday. A boy and a girl, Bowie and Sissie. They were fed from me and gave me their first word as my new name. They were easy to fall in love with, which sounds obvious now, but I spent my whole pregnancy *certain* I would give birth to two dreadful lizards for whom I would feel nothing. And Alan was there, always, giving the kids a kiss on the head as he got more and more handsome in middle age, while my body warped and stretched like a soft dough pulled at both ends.

I get home and boil the kettle, stripping down into my underwear and putting on a pair of too-big athletic shorts. My apartment, all exposed brick and unlit windows, closes in on me more and more every day. I can hear the upstairs neighbour's dog as it walks, the *click-clack* of its claws on cheap hardwood. In my head, the dog is a handsome poodle with long manicured talons, walking to its owner's sunlit rumpus room to beg for treats made from organic offal. The thought is so sensual to me that it's almost erotic – rooms bathed in light, a warm circle of people, thoughtfulness, even about a pet. I touch myself for a while and then fall asleep. My unfinished tea goes cold beside me.

The mistake I made was thinking about Alan, because now he's in my dream. Some nights he's there but he doesn't look like Alan, as if my brain has recast his role – he'll be played by someone I passed by in the street and I only know it's Alan because it's *my* brain. But tonight he's him. The dream is that we're at the old house and he comes home from work. The twins are sitting in the front room, glued to their iPads and finally quiet for the first time in hours. I'm drinking red wine in the clothes I woke up in that morning. Alan walks through the door and the air immediately changes. I usher the kids into their rooms, out of his sight, but he's already seen them sitting there on the devices, those blank faces kids get while staring at a screen. His whole expression changes, like I've ruined his day. He's sputtering something about too much

screen-time, how I'm lazy and *this* is my only job. He doesn't finish the thought before he raises his hand and strikes it across my face like a scythe. I feel my nose bleeding. Blinding white pain and I wake up on the couch at three in the morning dizzy and sweaty.

That's not even the real memory. The real memory is worse, because the memory exists in context, not in a vacuum like the dream, and I recall it with the knowledge that it wasn't *always* like that. I often found myself feeling love for Alan, wanting to touch him, and be touched, wanting him to come inside me so we can make more kids that look like him. I feared him so rarely that the times I wanted to leave passed quickly, and he was a good enough parent that I knew the twins would be fine. I was wrong, of course, but I trusted my perception.

I don't sleep the rest of the morning. I clean the bathroom. I jog on the spot. Chain smoke. I dial my mother's number, knowing she's normally awake by five A.M, but then I find myself backspacing the digits furiously and shutting off the phone, as if she would be able to sense I had considered it. She texts every now and then – linking me news articles about the coronial inquest, checking in with me, asking me to come to dinner with her and Rodney. I ignore them all. I spent the first few months after everything that happened sleeping in my childhood bedroom and eating every meal with her. But as soon as I felt ready to move on and pretend it never happened, I could see that she could never allow for that. She would look at me with grief in her eyes, as if I was constantly emanating the *stench* of it all. I had to stop being around her, and I had to stop immediately. I got a mortgage with my payout and bought the apartment and deleted her number. I'm sure she walks around mystified by my disappearance and feeling like the victim of some great injustice.

I walk to the twenty-four-hour grocery store just before sunrise. I'm the last person on Earth, barring the dead-eyed cashier standing perfectly still at the register. I ponder instant oatmeal in the cereal aisle, wondering whether to buy the cheapest brand or the high-fibre variety. I wonder if I even deserve high fibre. I often find comfort in punishing myself like this, which is why I linger by the kids' breakfast cereals. The garish colours of the toucan mascots, the promise of a blood sugar spike at eight in the morning. I marvel at my choice to feed this garbage to the twins when they were younger, but I can't remember what exact brand they ate.

On the morning it happened, I'd woken to find Alan seated at the kitchen island with the twins as he ate a bowl of their preferred sugar bomb alongside them. He'd lazily tied Sissie's hair into piggy tails the way I always did, with the result being that she looked unkempt and clown-like. I drove the kids to kindergarten and retied her hair before she went inside. When I got home, Alan told me he'd taken the day off work and he'd like to spend some time just with me. Back then I was delighted, but now I can see the disrespect in him assuming I had no plans to keep. He was ready to play with me and that's all that mattered to him.

I buy the cereal with a little cartoon monkey on the front smiling like a moron. I like him. I have no other plans for the weekend. I walk back home and sit on the couch, already exhausted. My phone rings but the number is apparently from Finland, so I ignore it. A ringing phone makes my heart race, and so for a moment I am somehow simultaneously close to panic but fighting sleep. I don't want to waste the day, but I have no real goals or hopes anyway. I open a window and lay down on the couch, drifting into a comfortable sleep licked by the cool breeze.

In sleep, Alan's features get all mixed up, so he has his eyes but a stranger's nose and mouth. It has the effect of anonymizing him, somewhat fictionalising the events of the day in question. I've pored over the sequence of events many times, both to myself and to a series of authority figures, resulting in the dream having a rote quality. Alan takes me to brunch in town and we laugh about his work stories, about how his boss is rude in a childish way and how his job seems pointless sometimes. He's romantic and charming and sexy, so when he promises to me that he's going to change and get help and be better, I believe him again. We float through the morning and early afternoon. We binge-watch something ridiculous on his laptop in bed until he closes the computer and goes down on me. We dread having to pick the kids up at three, knowing it will be like every other day then. But we don't get that far. After lunchtime, something changes. I still can't remember what prompted it, and in the dream the change is depicted by a falling feeling in my stomach, like an elevator in freefall. I had spent so long tiptoeing around his unpredictable moods, but it only ever had the effect of kicking the can down the road. He was always going to snap. I'm so frustrated by the fact that he'd ruined a lovely day that I argue back, which makes his face redden and fists clench.

Alan doesn't slap me. He moves purposefully and slowly towards me, shoves me quickly to the ground, and kneels on my arms. He wraps meaty hands around my neck and tightens them. It takes a while to choke someone to death, too long for Alan to hold out, so I don't die. He leaves immediately, like he always does, embarrassed, or maybe just exhausted from rage. I put on a shirt with a clunky collar to hide my neck when I pick the twins up. In the backseat of the car, they are quiet, and I keep catching their eyes in the rearview mirror staring at me. I ask them if they want to go to my mother and Rodney's house for a little while and they respond with a single, mouse-like *yes* in unison. Alan is still gone when we get home and I pack bags dangerously quick, looking out to the driveway constantly. I usher the kids into my car and they complain and moan, confused by the urgency. I speed through intersections and roundabouts and leave town, the two-lane highway deserted and surrounded by a barren scrub. Sissie asks me why we're leaving today and that she doesn't want to miss kindergarten. Bowie echoes her concerns. I answer with sobs and a garbled response and the kids stare silently.

In the real world, I probably drove with the kids for hours on the way to my mother's, based on how close we were to the city when everything happened. In my dream, I have a conversation with the kids. It's warm and loving, and I soothe their worries like the amazing mother I always dreamed of being. They say they love me, and I tell them that I love them more than anyone. I know why my dream does this – why it gives me this one simple reprieve – but it's a bit on the nose. As soon as their final words are uttered from the backseat, Alan's car appears up ahead, turning off a dirt road on the same highway. It speeds, coming towards us the wrong direction, and I slam on the brakes, stopping just in time. The kids freak out and I pretend to be in control, telling them to stay in their booster seats as I get out and confront Alan. He's seething with anger, but I can sense fear and uncertainty behind it all. He's much more dangerous when he's afraid. He demands to know where we're going, or, failing that, that we return home with him. I tell him I need to protect the kids and he tells me he'd never hurt them (and up until that point he never had). We go back and forth, circling each other like we're about to have a Cowboy-style shootout. Alan's anger falls and then rises again, and he returns to his car.

I turn back to the kids, thinking I've talked us out of danger, but Alan returns, holding a jerry-can of fuel, eyes wild. He snatches the keys from me and climbs into the front seat of my car while the kids try to undo their restraints. I rush to the back door but Alan's locked it internally. My

dream departs from reality here, because I know – in my bones – that in actuality, I spent an anguishing minute tearfully negotiating with Alan, pulling uselessly on the handles of the doors, and screaming in protest. I searched the roadside for a rock or debris to smash a window, all while Alan shouted at me to promise I would return home with him and the kids.

But in my dream, I stand by and watch. I don't respond to his demands or the children's cries. I stand perfectly still as he ignites his cigarette lighter and is set aflame in the driver's seat immediately. Sentry-like, I step back from the fire that engulfs the car, my husband, my children. The twins don't even have time to scream. I smell petrol and see the fire expand upwards, like a column. There is a period of time that I feel it's possible I could save the twins, but a moment later I know for certain I cannot.

I feel the unspeakable relief of knowing they are dead, and that they feel nothing. I stumble to the ground and wait for a car to pass by, like a lost child waiting for an adult to help them. The truck driver who pulls over finds me laying on the gravel shoulder, covering my eyes, while a tower of flame rages just metres behind me. I cannot speak, and I collapse into the stranger's arms, standing on feeble legs. He scoops me up and holds me like a mother would, and I nuzzle into him like an infant would, wetting his sleeve with my tears. The dream ends with me in his warmth, and I wake feeling nurtured and clean.

I stand at my kitchen sink and sip coffee. I hear the neighbours' intercom buzz and them cheerfully welcoming their visitor into the building. The click-clack of their handsome dog walking on their floor, and their children's laughter, followed by the playful screams of their imaginative play.

Barefoot, I walk out of my apartment into the corridor, to the elevator, and finally to the building's front door. Only now do I realise it's pouring rain, and I watch the neighbours' visitor as he enters through the door, completely soaked. He smiles at me warmly and then remarks on the storm. I say, flat-toned, that it's not a storm, just a rain shower. He thanks me for clarifying and gets in the elevator. The sky outside is dark, day like night, and the rain is tropical and heavy.

I step through the front door and close my eyes, expecting to be drenched.

I remain dry, but for my bare feet on wet cement. I open my eyes to see clouds parting and towers of rain in every direction, except directly overhead. Water drops from the eaves and branches out front and frogs croak in the silence. It's beautiful and uncomplicated.

So I decide that I'm going to live.

Not the same life I would have had thirteen months ago. Something new, small, and bearable. I will eat food that is delicious, look at beautiful things I can't describe, be with pretty men who treat me like a person, babysit my nieces and nephews, let my mother love me, and answer my phone when it rings.

The world is still a place hospitable for me, and I can prove it –

Sometimes it stops raining the moment you step outside.