

I try to catch the knife after it slips off the counter; the handle hits my shoe and the blade clatters.

You just tried to catch that? Really?

Me and Harley stare at it. It could have sliced my hand open.

You have to clean that, Omar, before you use it.

Yes, Chef.

When my cell rings, I'm thinking of Anna in our apartment, slicing onions faster than me. She would refuse to open a window or try any of the tricks you can google to stop the tears. Instead, she would slice the white vegetable, cry, and then come sobbing into the living room, pretending that I had said something horrible to her. She would do this every time she cut onions: it became our dinnertime routine that I was an inconsiderate monster.

Hello? Who is this?

It's Bernie.

What?

Bernie. Anna's father.

What do you want?

Melissa eyes me and I press the cellphone against my ear to hear better. I move away from the pans and look at her. Red paint blisters off the kitchen walls. She's too mean for her bright blue dress, death blonde bob, and wet-black stockings. Harley says she's too old to order us around from the tip of the kitchen. She never wears her apron. He watches her with thirst. Grappa's is probably going to close soon—we never have enough customers, but it always feels too busy. Pay is one week late—pay is cash in hand—and Melissa keeps promising that it's coming tomorrow,

tomorrow tomorrow, I promise the money is there. I shrug my shoulders and move to the back.

Yo Harley, finish that for me.

Why would Anna's father call?

Are you free?

I'm at work.

Can we talk?

What do you want?

Are you free?

I'm on break.

I need something from you.

For what?

Anna died last night.

What does that mean?

Anna passed away yesterday.

I say nothing.

Can we talk?

What do you mean died? How did she die?

She passed away, Omar.

From what?

She killed herself.

From what?

What?

What are you talking about? What do you mean she killed herself?

I—

Yo Bernie, what?

Did you know that she—

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What are you saying? What are you saying?

I know you broke up.

We broke up like a year ago. A year ago. Why are you calling me! Why are you calling me to tell me this? She broke up with me—why are you calling me to tell me this?

I'm sorry, please—you had to have known something?

My body lurches away from me. I hang up the phone. My mind stays with the call, but my body moves out the back door, away from the noise of the kitchen.

Look at the snow: the way it's falling to the ground, as if God had ordered it to march.

I slept like a cracked egg last night. A slug joint brought me sleep. I crumbled together three roaches and gulped the smoke down; it left me like a ghost.

She asked me out when we were sixteen. I told her I loved her in the basement of a friend's house. His parents were upstairs baking french fries with shredded cheese and gravy. Scott in the den, *Jeopardy!* on, Anna's friend lying with him, and he told me later that he had fingered her for the first time, surprised at how warm everything was, how the smell stayed on his fingers, and how his first instinct was to lick them: the taste was nothing, but her eyes went wide—she couldn't believe he would taste her like that.

We were sitting next to each other in the hall with warm coolers. She said it back, three times in a row. Ten years we strung together. She always said it like that: I love you I love you I love you.

It's Sunday and I have no work. The memory of a cigarette

starts crawling up my throat even though I'm on eight months of quitting, but, no money, so I do twenty-five push-ups instead. I'll steal one of Nathan's beers later. Light leaks onto the floor from my one window cradled in the corner of my room.

My phone is blowing up—condolences. It's on Facebook. Every time my cell dings, I look at it, read the name, but don't read the message. No calls.

Famous among my friends:

We're not breaking up! Omar, we're not, like, fucking ending forever. You're always going to be a part of me.

We had broken up, off and on, away from each other, rolling back, so many times over ten years. I don't know how many actual days we were together—only that she was there, always, even if we didn't speak.

We had really committed to our breakup six months ago and hadn't spoken in four—our longest stretch.

I do thirty jumping jacks and a sweat stain like a squid appears on my boxers. I open the window. The snow is staying on the ground for the first time this year. I take a red dress she left from the closet and sit with it on my lap, staring through the window, allowing the wind to pull into the room. I realize that my sweat will mingle with whatever smell of hers is left. I let it happen. When we broke up that last time I felt like I had misplaced something small but vital, like a set of keys, something that was mine.

I called my parents three times last night and they never picked up. They didn't really know her, but they knew about her, and I wanted to talk about the idea of her with someone, even if it had to be them. I let the phone ring forever, until I remembered that

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they had stopped paying for voice mail. They still pay for call display, though.

I know it's Matthew knocking on the door. I ignore it. Nathan finally lets him in.

You a'ight?

Why?

I know this is hard.

What is?

Don't be a retard.

Okay.

I'm here for you. He puts his hand on my shoulder. You're my boy. Neither of us has ever done this, and I think of the movies we've seen and how that's where we're getting our lessons from.

He runs his hand over his head, the bristles making a short popping noise. He's about three shades darker than me; his bright blue hoodie works on him in a way it couldn't on me. He pulls it off and I see his post-university health-kick muscles squeezing out of his wifebeater, like smooth rocks have been slid under his skin.

Put this on.

Nah.

Yo, it's one, get dressed. Let's get murked.

I look at his Timbs and I know he cleans them every night. He follows my gaze to his shoes and eyes them anxiously. Twice, white girls from small towns have thought he was black and targeted him for that; he went along until they fucked and then taught them about Madras.

Intelligence when drunk: there is vomit, but it's in a plastic bag.

I had become used to that wandering worrying shame after blacking out. With Matthew in the room I don't think too much; still, I scroll quickly through last night's memories trying to figure out if I embarrassed myself. We spent the day in his apartment and then the evening at Get Well until I couldn't walk. I tried to talk to two white dudes at the bar about the arcade machines that were pressed up against the wall, but I don't remember the outcome. Matthew led us back home—he is next to me now, a comma of white-yellow vomit on the inside of his wrist, his breathing shallow. I want to stretch out, so I move off my bed and onto the floor, taking a blanket, leaving him the pillow.

Yo, hmm.

What up?

What you got for breakfast?

Nothing.

Nothing?

Nathan has eggs.

How many?

I dunno. I think I heard him and his girl last night.

Man, you didn't hear nothing except you vomiting.

That's your vomit, not my vomit.

Where is it? Is it on your floor?

Nah. I got you a bag.

How you feeling?

Fine. I got some Advil.

Not your head.

Your stomach must be rough.

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How you feeling about—

About what?

Don't be dumb.

Why don't you mind your own business?

Who you going to the viewing with?

You going to pick me up, right?

My room is unfamiliar to me this morning. I've lost the words for simple things: the doorknob is a blob of yellow metal, the door a weak rectangle of cheap wood, my blanket scratchy, itchy, flattened cloth trapping heat on my body. My brain struggles for grip. I'm too scared to think of Anna. When I look at the pile of books on my desk my mind scrambles to locate the word for them—books kitabs livres. Matthew watches me yank open my drawer for a joint and tells me, unhelpfully, that we smoked it all last night. I groan and lie back on the floor. I can do this. I can power through this. My cellphone is in my pocket and I delete her number from it. I regret it so fast I almost laugh—I don't have her number memorized. That's okay. I have a shift later; if I yell at someone I'll forget all about this. I focus on the nausea speaking in my stomach.