

Cake

A pile of shoes, some probably still warm in the sole. Shoes were lined up along the half-height entry wall, so many that incoming guests now had to lay their shoes on top of the pairs of the guests who had arrived first. There is a smell coming off them, a locker room smell. Can you smell in dreams?

I place my sneakers all the way off to the side, thinking I'm being clever and will have an easier time retrieving them. Shoes-off households made me anxious, not knowing how far I was allowed to walk before my friend would become agitated by my dirty feet. I liked that about Japan, when I visited. The threshold was always distinct, expectations clear.

I move out of the way so others arriving can situate themselves and enter into a gathering for an occasion I can't place. It could be a party to celebrate a holiday, housewarming, or birthday. No, not that—that's right, it's an engagement party.

Jo wears a white dress and won't let anyone drink red wine in case they spill on her. She puts all the bottles new guests present to her under the sink next to the bleach so everyone has to drink white wine or champagne.

None of it is chilled. This is on purpose, and somehow my fault. Jo is marrying Eddie, and Eddie used to love me. If I'm here, then by Jo's estimation, everyone has to suffer for it. Except Jo invited me to the party, I remember, not Eddie.

Remember is not quite the right word. I know it all of a sudden, or all of a sudden, I realize I had always known.

I don't know why she made me come, but I know I didn't want to. And now I'm here drinking warm sweet wine and sweating through my shirt. The cotton clings to my back. I am

under-dressed. I don't even want to see Eddie again, especially not like this, but here he is, walking up to me.

He comes up to me and I swear to god, he smells like he's wearing a whole bottle of cologne, and it's my grandfather's cologne. woodspice, a touch of floral. He comes up to me and for a moment I'm relieved after all, glad to have a chance to clear the air or figure out what is actually going on. But then he explains that he came over just to tell me that he can't talk to me. Not because of Jo and not because he's mad, he says. *I'm just busy, okay?*

And I try to say *of course, yes, obviously*, but he is already gone.

I am swallowed by the crowd. They shift to fill in the gap Eddie left. There are so many people here, and they are all way younger than Eddie and Jo and me. They look like we looked when we all first met, freshman year of college. I can't remember how long it has been. We didn't act this snooty though, surely. I feel like a kid at my parents' yearly Christmas party.

I walk through the living room, eavesdropping. One couple is talking about cheese from different regions in France, and a pair of twins is trying to recall the melody of a Wagner opera, humming ominous notes back and forth at each other in increasingly peeved tones. A group of friends is talking about rationalist philosophers, so I slip into their huddle and try choke out what I remember about Descartes, but I pronounce his name wrong and they all scotch their little circle in tighter until I am on the outside and starting at some tall man-child's back.

He has to angle his head funny to stand at full height. The ceiling is low like the ceiling of a basement that was initially intended for boxes and spiderwebs and mice droppings, the kind that may end up carpeted and painted and made to look like a place people are supposed to live, though they only do because they can't afford a regular space. I wonder how he can stand that way. If the ceiling collapses or the foundation revolts, his neck is sure to snap.

Jo and Eddie are floating through the crowd now, which parts so I can see that she is letting him drink red wine because white wine gives him a headache. All the separate clusters of conversations are shifting to face them, pulled by their gravity. The crowd chants for a speech and I need to get out of here.

I go to find my shoes but the pile I find by the door is smaller by half. I rummage through what is left but I know my shoes aren't there. All the shoes I touch are cold, but I can still smell the feet of their owners. I can hear Eddie's voice but can't pay attention to the words.

A small woman with yellow hair at the back of the crowd notices me. *Don't separate the pairs, quit digging like that*, she says, and I think I say something like *I'm sorry, I just need to find my shoes*, and I know if this was real life I'd be crying.

She says, *Well, Jo had Sammy move a bunch of shoes to the back room so maybe yours are there*.

I don't know who Sammy is, but I head down the hall to where she points.

As I shimmy along the wall trying to avoid people, there is a swell of horrified gasps. I freeze. But it's not me. Eddie spilled some wine on Jo's dress, and it now blossoms red across the gauzy fabric on her stomach. She doesn't look mad, she looks like a martyr, smiling through the embarrassment.

The hallway doesn't have a light, but I can see a lit room at the end of the passage. The room is empty of people and things, and quiet. It is half lit, I find when I reach it, so bright under the one twitching fluorescent light, the rest of the space receding quickly into shadow. It is bigger than a bedroom. My mom would call it a bonus room.

There is a wall of cabinets reaching all the way to the far end, so far that I almost can't see the last set of doors, and really, this room is far too big to belong in any house this tiny. But it is here, so who am I to question it?

I start opening the cabinets looking for my shoes. The first three sets of doors open to reveal nothing. Empty shelves in an empty room. Do Eddie and Jo know this room is here? It looks like they have never used it.

The next cabinet holds bins full of scissors and glue sticks, pipe cleaners and markers. I put a pair of large googly eyes that I discover in my back pocket. There is lots of colored paper, full sheets in little paper organizers, and a pile of scraps stacked haphazardly on the bottom shelf. If I wasn't in such a hurry to leave before someone finds me here, I'd have spent a lot longer trying to figure out the shapes that had been cut off from each scrap. The top sheet looks like it is missing a star.

The cabinet beside that one has a whole shelf of tambourines, another of recorders, another of maracas. I think I must be in an elementary classroom, that this huge room in this tiny house where there is a party taking place I do not want to be at is really just school. I blow on a recorder, almost remembering "Hot Crossed Buns." I stop, because I don't want to be discovered.

The last cabinet is full of cubbies. Of course, the last cabinet I open is not the last one there, as there are dozens more stretching on. I don't count how many exactly and I don't know what is in them anyhow, because in the cubbies in this cabinet there are shoes. But not my shoes.

I hear voices coming. The yellow-haired woman pops her head in the doorway, squinting in the light. She brought a man in a striped polo shirt with her. *Hey! This is Sammy*, she says.

Sammy shoots finger guns at me, and then they're off. I didn't think I had said *I don't know who Sammy is* out loud, but it's hard to know what is happening.

I return to my search. No luck. I am desperate, and I decide I should just steal someone's shoes. I try on the shoes, both women and men's, but none of them fit. Not the pair of giant white pumps or the expensive little loafers, not even the flip flops that are more air than shoe.

Actually, I see my feet are quite large. Not by nature, not like normal large feet, but swollen and pudgy. Clown feet. They don't hurt and they aren't red, they are just puffed up like some feet get from flying or reacting to too much sodium.

I problem solve. Ice. I need to find some ice to bring it down so I can, at least, fit in the flip flops. I sneak to the kitchen hoping no one sees my feet, but no one looks at me at all anyway. This is worse, somehow.

I check the fridge first, because those feel like the rules. There is a whole fish in there, wrapped up in plastic with one sharp fin poking out. On the shelf below it is a round yellow cake, and the fishy liquid is dribbling down on to it.

I gag. Now that I have looked in the fridge, the freezer will open. There is no ice in the ice maker, and nothing else that may bring the swelling down in my feet.

The ice that used to live there has been dumped in a bucket and the wine bottles are now chilling there. I wonder if I am forgiven. I wonder if I will ruin everything if I steal the ice bucket to dunk my fat feet into.

I am thinking this when Jo spots me and walks over. I panic. Her belly is wine-purple, and I don't know what to say to her, so I tell her I like it, and she says *Thank you, I do too.*

And she says, *Where have you been?*

And I say, *I don't know, looking for my shoes somewhere.*

And she says, *I have your shoes. Come on.*

And she is holding my hand and dragging me back down the hall, back to the room where I was alone with the craft supplies and musical instruments and shoes. I am still holding a piece of ice. Jo opens the cabinet to reveal more shoes, shoes I didn't find yet. I gave up too soon.

Take any of them, she says.

I say, *I don't understand*, and she says, *Didn't you hear our announcement?*

No, I say, *I was looking for my shoes.*

These are all your shoes. This is your house.

I don't know if this has always been my house, or if Jo is giving it to me as a gift, a consolation prize. If the house is mine, are all the things in it mine too?

I try on four pairs of shoes with my ice-free hand and they all fit, and I can't tell if my feet are bloated anymore but I don't care, because now that I have shoes, I can leave.

But if this is my house, can I still leave?

I hear singing, and Eddie is coming toward me with the round yellow cake. The whole party follows behind him, and they are singing something strange and grim, more dirge than "Happy Birthday."

The ice cube in my hand dribbles water on my dress.

What was I expecting? It's not my birthday. There are googly eyes all over the cake, jiggling as Eddie and the partygoers walk toward me. At the center, I know it is spoiled.

Everyone is looking at me now.