

You, Me, Tomorrow and the Day Before

1994 is winding down and Robinson is saying how the mushrooms are affecting his perception of everything all at once. He's smoking near the cracked door to the balcony, his paunch is more pronounced, his auburn curls thinning, his triceps less defined. You want to head into the kitchen and check on Maria, see if she needs a hand with the coq au vin. But Robinson needs you to hear this first. In fact he's trembling, he's close to tears, that's how badly he needs you to listen. A second ago he was saying how much he loves you, how he knew the minute you met that you'd be friends. Now he's making loops with the smoke from his cigarette to illustrate an infinity symbol. Behind him, on your TV, a ball is dropping and a countdown is showing that you're 2:37:14 away from the New Year.

"Do you get what I'm saying?" Robinson's asking.

You sort of do, though not in the same literal, spiritual, metaphysical sense that he does. Because the shrooms haven't hit you the way they've hit Robinson. His pupils are dilated to the point where you can hardly see the chestnut of his irises. He's licking his lips a lot.

"This is you, this is me, and this is tomorrow and the day before," he says. He flicks his cigarette over the balcony and continues making loops in mid-air with his fist. "Maria and Anelise are in here, too. And all our love and hatred for each other. And in here are all the scaffolds and rivers and our minds and *Pulp Fiction* and *Hoop Dreams* and Janet Jackson and Jeff Buckley and our dinner, dude. Even the olive in your fingers right now. You get it?"

You nod. Then you eat your stuffed olive and finish your entire Modelo in one sip. It was full a second ago. It's gone now and your toes are tingling, and so is your sciatica. A couple of years ago your back started hurting. Now you're twenty-seven and it's getting worse every year.

"Our energies are all interconnected," you say. "Like in a Buddhist sense?"

“Exactly. That’s how I feel right now. I can feel it, like under my skin.”

You understand. You also accept that you and Robinson are different thinkers and feelers. He is one way and you are another way, and you’ll never be the same. He can experience this energy but right now you cannot. How pleasant it would be if you could walk through one’s brain like a small garden, stopping to look around and admire the tomatoes basking in sunlight.

“Where are you going?” Robinson says.

You’re standing. When did that happen? You were just on the couch. You shrug at Robinson and walk down the hallway of your one-bedroom apartment, where you and Maria have lived for six months. String lights, bright golden and wrapped around the bannister, illuminate a path to your kitchen.

Maria is in here. Anelise is not. Weren’t they just in here? No—Maria is standing against the dining table in a long black dress, alone. The dress is comfortable but fits her so well. She looks brilliant. You see she isn’t making coq au vin for everyone like you thought. Instead she’s putting the last dollops of ketchup on a meatloaf.

You come up behind her, rest a hand on the arch of her back. Give her hip a gentle squeeze. She squeezes your hand gently back, then returns to her duty. Because of her, because of Maria, you pity other people. Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night and think so hard the words, “I love you, Maria,” you’re almost certain she can hear your voice echoing in her dreams. You’re guilty because your love for her is this strong. You’re guilty because: Why is your happiness deserved more than others?

“What happened to the coq au vin?” you ask.

“What, is that a joke?” she laughs. “Didn’t we make that a couple years ago?”

You study her hair as she sprinkles fried onions on top of the meatloaf. It's shorter, her split ends are gone and she's dyed it blonde. For so many years she took pride in the fact that she never dyed her hair. Now she has.

"When did you do that?" you ask. "I didn't even notice." And you think: I never notice small things.

"Hm?" she says. "Can't hear you, El."

"Oh, nothing. Never mind." You stare out the kitchen window, into the dark night. "Robinson was saying how our energies are all connected, how everything in the universe is connected. I think he's feeling the mushrooms. Maybe I am too."

Still Maria isn't fully listening to you. You never blame her for this. She's a bad multitasker. She's slicing the meatloaf with precision, her tongue poking through her lips.

"Pardon?" she says.

Or you think she says that. Then suddenly you can remember Robinson in your living room, talking about energies last year. Or the year before. Like yesterday. You wish he and Anelise were here but you know they are busy raising a fresh newborn. You hope you don't have a child anytime soon because your writing, your passion, is stuck. Going nowhere. In the other room, the living room of your apartment that only recently has started feeling too cramped, you can hear the voices of women arguing.

You recognize those voices. On the way back to the living room—salad in one hand and a tray of sliced meatloaf in the other—you stop thinking of Robinson. You can't believe that Anneke is in your apartment. Her first time back in the city in three years. It feels like it's been much longer since you've seen her. You

were teenagers? You were children? Was it when she was teaching you multiplication tables in the upstairs bathroom while Mom and Dad were out?

“This is why I don’t get involved with conspiracies,” Anneke is saying. “Waste of time.”

“No one with any real common sense or the ability to think just the slightest bit critically believes the world’s going to end tonight,” Zoe says.

“That’s literally not true. *Literally* not. People are panic buying pasta and canned soup. Sometimes I forget you don’t watch the news.”

“It’s funny,” Zoe says. “The way people are acting is funny. We never learn from our mistakes.”

“It’s not funny,” Anneke says.

You should interject. You don’t enjoy people arguing, you never have, not since Mom and Dad, even when it’s not full-blown. But do they even notice you’re there? You feel like you’re not there and you never were there and you never will be there—in your tiny living room with your sister and her partner.

You glance at your TV. It’s time for an upgrade. In all regards, time for an upgrade. It’s 1999 and you can recognize how disappointing this year was. Did you accomplish anything? You made decent money at work but didn’t get a single poem published, not in any of the journals you submitted to, even the less-heralded ones. Have you ever accomplished anything aside from being loved by Maria?

“Elliot, my glass is empty,” Anneke says, turning from Zoe. “I can’t listen to this nonsense anymore.” You feel the weight and glass of a wine bottle in your hand. Are you eating dinner, too? Or have you already? It’s a cabernet sauvignon, the wine. You fill your sister’s glass. You want to tell her how much you’ve

missed her. She was your best friend once but then you grew up and she moved to Vancouver and now you're just friends. It's not the same.

“So, Elliot,” Zoe says. “Any little ones soon?”

“Shit, I don't know,” you say. “Hopefully not. I'm still practically a baby myself.”

They laugh. You laugh. But you do know you'll have a child. You know because Maria is pacing from one end of the condominium to the other trying to get Leroy to stop crying, and your guests are gone, and Leroy's been crying all evening, you almost forgot it's New Year's Eve, his shrieks are that loud. It's 2003, you're thirty-six, and a two-bedroom condo suddenly doesn't seem like the right environment for a baby. 720 square feet, a sometimes-working dishwasher, a balcony not large enough for three people, marble countertops that look nice but are completely impractical from a space-for-cooking-and-appliances perspective. It doesn't seem any better than your old apartment despite being recently renovated and more expensive.

You want Leroy to enjoy a yard one day.

“Can you take him for a minute? I need to lie down,” Maria says.

“Are we staying up for the countdown?” you say.

“I don't know. If he keeps you up, sure. I'm not promising anything on my end.”

Maria hands you the child you created together, kisses your cheek, and you hold Leroy and never want to let him go. Did your father ever feel this way about you? No, you doubt it. Leroy is one now, and if someone ever tried to take him from you, you would kill them, you're certain.

You can hear a large group of people in the condominium next door celebrating. Why are the walls so thin? Why are those people so loud? Don't they know you're raising a ten-month-old baby? Why did your realtor lie to you about the noise here?

Before Leroy came out of Maria, you didn't know it was actually possible for a vagina to split open that wide. But then you saw it with your own eyes and you gripped your son in one hand like Yorick's skull pondering life and death. You promised him right there that you would be a better father than Dad was to you and Anneke. That was the only moment in your life when you can recall time completely stopping.

"It's okay, stop crying, Leroy," you say.

And thank God, he stops, and your hands are weightless. Leroy is to the left of you at the dining table. He's grown. His arms and legs are long for a boy his age, the mole on his left cheek is pronounced and he talks much older than he should. Smart kid. Knows a good joke already. Fantastic vocabulary for a nine-year-old. Up past his bedtime right now, but it's New Year's so what the hell, he can break one rule. Maria is holding your hand under the table because she knows you get uncomfortable being around Dad. Even now, in your forties, you feel smaller, quieter, less yourself around him, like you're closer in age to Leroy, like the tiniest insult from Dad could debilitate you.

Is this the first time you've all been together? Maria, Mom, Dad and Leroy (why do the two of them get along?), Anneke and Zoe, all your aunts and uncles and the cousins you feel you barely know. This must be the first time you've all been in the same room. You can't remember. You want everything to slow down, but you know it won't.

"Cheers!" everyone is shouting.

Leroy has a glass of champagne in his hands.

“Leroy—who gave you that?”

He shouldn't be growing up this fast. You reach for it but your son pulls away from you.

“It's just a sip,” Dad says. And then Leroy chugs the entire thing in one go, and everyone around the table laughs except for you, you don't want to, but then you are laughing too, and it's nearly 10:30 p.m. and you wish you'd brought Maria's one-click Kodak to capture everyone's faces. Years from now no one will look the same.

“It's weird, isn't it?” Maria is saying. “Not having him here.”

You blink and you're in bed. Dad died just like that, a heart attack the day after you turned fifty-three. And you never got to tell him all the reasons you were disappointed in him for being a shitty father, because you were too much of a coward. You never got to say, “Why didn't you come to my university graduation? Why did it take you six months to meet Leroy? Why is money more important to you than a relationship? Why did you make Mom so miserable?”

At least you wrote about it subtly in your poems. The ones no one will ever get to see because all you know is misery and rejection on that front. You hope that one day, you can forgive him.

“It is,” you say.

Tonight your back is destroying you. You know making it to the end of the countdown is not a reality. Maria is at the foot of the bed brushing her hair, and you are lying on the floor trying to get your back straightened out. You own a bungalow. You've lived here for six years, it's the house you purchased when Leroy was 13, and it's startling to you how everywhere you've lived can feel like a home but nowhere ever feels permanent.

“I don’t like it,” you say. “I wish he was here.”

Leroy didn’t come home for the holidays. It is the first Christmas, the first New Year, where you won’t see him. Won’t argue with him over which authors are most underrated: Kincaid, Salter, Ogawa, Bambara. Leroy’s an English major at UBC. This makes you proud. But also it terrifies you because you’ve never made money writing poetry, only lost it. Every dollar you ever earned has come from jobs that don’t fulfill you. You know there’s more time to accomplish something. But it never, ever feels that way.

“I miss him,” you say.

“I know, me too,” Maria says.

“I don’t have any control over it. Over any of it,” you say.

“No one does,” she says.

“I should talk to him. I should do that soon,” you say.

“Call him tomorrow, Elliot. Leave him be for tonight.”

“Call him?” You’re confused suddenly. “Call who?”

“Leroy. You can call Leroy tomorrow,” Maria says.

You shake your head and think no, that’s not who, I’ll never be able to speak to him again. I’ll never be able to tell him I forgive him.

But at least it's nice to be where you are: on this hotel balcony lit by candles, a warm breeze raising the hair on your arms, Maria beside you (always beside you, even despite your shortcomings in the earlier years of your relationship), the ocean below you, a silent moon far above you.

You came here, to San Juan, this New Year's Eve to celebrate your book of poetry finally getting published by a respectable publisher. And although it didn't sell the 2,000 copies you'd hoped it would, it got out there. You made a small but decent chunk of change from the advance. You got a few letters from fans too—it made you wonder how people got ahold of your and Maria's home address.

You're both in your late 60s now. You've travelled to celebrate the New Year in a country that has always intrigued you. You achieved some success, mild success, and guess what? It wasn't as gratifying as you thought it would be. Your entire life you spent evenings at a desk destroying your lower back only to get one 137-page book published, and most of the poems were about your dad, and no one in your family has any idea what they are about aside from Leroy, and you don't even know if he enjoys them because he's never told you.

Maybe you should have tried even harder.

Next year you won't be here. On the beach. Next year you're with Robinson and Anelise. Even though they've divorced they remain friends and dedicated co-parents to their children. You've all promised each other that you will make it to the end of the countdown together.

Now Robinson takes out a plastic ziplock baggie. It's filled with a substance you've never seen before.

"Know what this is?" he says. His voice is like two rusted pots scraping against one another from years of Belmonts. You and Maria and Anelise shake your heads, and Robinson tells you it's ecstasy and mushrooms together. It's what "all the kids are doing." You look up and see on the TV that there is one

hour till the new year. Maria, Anelise, and Robinson all swallow their tablets, and you follow suit. You remember being young. It's still right there.

Fifteen minutes before the New Year, your friends and Maria stand in the middle of this living room and take their clothes off one article at a time.

"I wish I could always be naked," Maria says. "My entire life, everywhere I go I've wanted to be naked. It makes no sense that anyone wears clothes. Who invented clothing? What idiot did that?" she says.

"Right?" Anelise says. She turns and looks at Robinson. "You look the same."

You've never seen Robinson naked. Not in your 50-plus years of friendship. His testicles hang down to his knees, his stomach can hardly contain itself. Maria and Anelise both still have breasts somehow, it's magnificent, the way Maria still attracts you and always will, not just her body but the sound of her humming on a Sunday morning out in the sunlight while she tends the garden.

You notice you are naked as well. Your body a relic already. You can't remember a day in your life where you didn't experience a moment of discomfort, at least one second of pain, a blister on your hand from cooking oil leaping over the edge of the pan, one uncomfortable bowel movement, a stabbing that radiates from your back to your knee to your ankle.

"Just like I told you," Robinson says. And you get up and hold him and it is the first time you've ever been this close to another naked man. Why is that? "Just like I said," he says again. "Do you remember? Do you remember I told you about this all that time ago? About our energies?"

Resting your head on his shoulder, you nod, and you notice you're crying. "Do you think I'm a good father?" you ask Robinson. But when you lift your head, it is Anneke's shoulder you've been resting on. You're in the hospital together and it is almost the New Year again. It never stops, never slows down, and

you wish you weren't awake for this but you are. Mom is dying. Now she's dead, she's dead and it's no longer 2038, it's 2039, and so many people you know are dying, everyone you love is dead or dying. There isn't enough time to see all of them. You can hardly focus on the countdown because you miss Mom, you don't think anyone should have to live an entire life only to die, it's not fair. Her liver failed and Leroy hardly comes home for the holidays anymore, he just FaceTimes you and Maria and shows you your grandson. You always pictured Leroy living close to you, no more than a block away. Sometimes you wonder if you let him down at some point, if you tried too hard.

You don't watch the countdown this year. You stay up drinking Japanese whiskey. You think of Robinson dying of throat cancer and wonder if any of the memories you shared together are true. In a world filled with people, he was the only friend you had like that.

You don't stay up for it a few years later either. You lose Anneke, then Anelise. You don't stay up for it the next year, and Leroy has moved to Singapore with your daughter-in-law and grandson. He is a professor in the English department at NTU University, and when you speak to him you ask what he's teaching in his program. He tells you Maggie Nelson, Paule Marshall, Sigrid Nunez, Kobo Abe, and of course Carver and Morrison.

"Tolstoy?"

"Nope."

You shake your head. "You have to teach Tolstoy," you say.

"A lot of them don't have the attention span for that sort of description. Things have changed," he says.

"Things were changing when I was young," you say. "They still taught Tolstoy."

He laughs, very softly. And then a few minutes later you both say good-bye and hang up.

Now you are 84. Like that. You don't remember the last time you spent New Year's awake or with anyone. Maria is gone. Maria has been gone for four years now. When it happened, you thought of telling Leroy that you, a weak old man, were going to kill yourself. It wasn't fair that she died before you. You were always meant to die first. In the months after it happened, you felt the days were made of nothing, you thought you could reach out and grab a cloud and crush it in your palm and it would turn to dust and be nothing just like everything else.

But you didn't say that to Leroy. Not the next day, not the next week or next month, not five years after it's happened and you're still alive. You don't know if you never went through with it because you're too much of a coward or because you learned how much you wanted to keep remembering her. Remembering her was better than anything else. In fact after a while it seemed like the only nice thing left. How her mouth hangs slightly open when she falls asleep. How she gets mad at you but never for long enough. When she was in her 30s and still limber, how she would squat and bend her back to vacuum under the couch, singing to herself the entire time. There were all these small, beautiful things about her. Those are the only things that seem real about the world, you suppose.

Your room in the nursing home is small, confined, hardly sees the sun. You have a mini-fridge and a double bed for yourself, and the nice Ethiopian nurse comes to check on you several times a day. Mostly you talk to her about Leroy, and sometimes she says, "You seem like a good father." And when she says that you nod your head and don't respond. This morning she makes your bed and you ask her if Leroy is coming to visit, and she says yes, he's supposed to arrive from Singapore next week.

You stay up this year. These days your one glass of wine gets you drunk. You're not the same anymore, not the man who would often put back twelve Modelos in one evening and still see straight. You can remember being twenty-seven like it was yesterday. Now there are ten seconds left, nine, eight, seven, six.

“It was nice, wasn’t it?” you say to Robinson, and to Mom and Anneke, and to Leroy.

“But it could’ve been so much longer,” you say to Maria.

Then you lift yourself onto your feet. You haven’t stayed up this late in ages. The countdown ends, how fun—Happy New Year!—and you stretch your hand into the mini fridge and pour yourself one more glass of wine just for old-time’s sake. Isn’t that funny, when you sit down your back no longer hurts? In fact, nothing hurts anymore.