

## Signs

4,755 words

On a dry night in early January, Maura comes to. The feeling is similar to being awoken from a dream by a cry. The dreamer blinks, dazed, looking around for a source only to swallow and feel the dryness of her throat. The sound has come from her own mouth; the dreamer has awoken herself. Maura scans the patio. The faces around the fire display various expressions of boredom and concern. Nobody wants to hear this. Not because it's offensive but because it is untouchable and too personal, like reading someone's Notes app over their shoulder. Behind her in the kitchen Simone has started washing empty glasses and the pale, fluorescent light from the overhead washes a swath of brick to her right a sharp, flat white. Maura's eyes land on Ainsley's face across the fire. Then, she looks down to where Ainsley's hand sits on the lap of a woman named Linda. Maura licks her lips and keeps talking. She figures it is too late to turn back now.

“I moved Ainsley out of our place in Koreatown in March, I remember. When the vaccine was slowly rolling out. I guess neither of us felt like it was safe to leave until we'd both gotten the shot, but I don't think we ever verbalized that to each other. So there was this weird, pharmacological delay, almost. Although it's possible we just didn't feel ready to separate and used that as an excuse.”

The running water shuts off. Some seconds later a cabinet opens and closes. In the distance, down the hill, a dog is barking. Maura had promised herself she wouldn't do something like this, had gone so far as to plead with herself in the bathroom mirror two hours before she left her aunt's. Don't make it too much of this. Think of this night as more of a notation, a gesture, all above board. I'll meet your new girlfriend (or whatever she is), I'll get on a plane in the morning, we'll forget any of this ever happened, time marches on.

“I left for New York the day after we both got vaccinated. It was overwhelming and I was pretty sick but it felt right at the time. Maybe Ainsley remembers it differently.” She pauses here. “Ainsley and I always hold different versions of things. Which I think is beautiful, but also has made the post-breakup phase kind of complicated.” Tanya shifts in her chair and exchanges glances with Hailey. Simone re-enters from the kitchen and sits down with a tight smile.

“There was a mourning period for the relationship, but I didn’t feel I could engage with it because I was so eager to get out of there. Here. No offense—” Across from her, Ainsley curves her lip up in an approximation of a smile. Linda’s is the only laugh, a sharp exhale of air through the nose that sends a shiver of contempt down Maura’s spine. “I never felt like I had a calling in LA. It was like I was staying here temporarily. Again, that’s not a comment on our relationship, more on the city itself.”

They are in Hailey’s back yard in Highland Park. The pandemic is not quite in the rear view mirror so it was agreed that they would gather outside for this reunion. This trip had been planned back in August and reconsidered by Maura at least a dozen times since. Not with Ainsley, obviously. She had mostly subjected Lacey to her neuroses about visiting.

“I haven’t seen most of these people since we broke up. And now that she’s seeing someone it feels different.”

This had called for Lacey to usher Maura away from the crowded bar to a table by the window, which was currently in the process of being abandoned by a cadre of college-age boys. Lacey smiled at one of them as she sat down which caused the boy to look back twice as he pushed through the bar doors and out into the September downpour.

“Don’t go,” Lacey said. “I’m not kidding. What do you get out of it?”

Maura was grateful for the opportunity that the window provided for her to lean her chin on her palm and gaze out of it contemplatively. “Closure?” She had to smile along with Lacey at this. Lacey put a hand over hers and shook her head in this way she sometimes did, like a TV mom.

“No, sweetie. Nuh-uh.”

In truth, Maura wanted to show Ainsley the woman she had become. She had moved to Los Angeles for Ainsley when they graduated college and from the moment she stepped out from baggage claim at LAX into the gaping maw of the concourse, stinking of gasoline fumes and boasting a flat, dusty, bowl of sky, she’d known it was a mistake. There was an ambient sense of restraint to Los Angeles (the cage of her car, the teeming roads each the breadth of a small river, her flat square of a studio apartment) that wound its way into Maura’s body until it became a character flaw. Nothing was wrong with LA, it was her preternaturally detached and fearful persona. As Maura liked to say (and Ainsley hated), “Wherever you go, there you are.”

But none of it was true. As the months in New York raced onward the idea that she had once described herself as fearful felt more and more like a lie or errant rumor she’d heard in passing. In New York there was no restraint because there was no space, no room to breathe between sensations. The summer air grew full and heavy around her as nights got shorter, nights of pressing her body into other sweaty bodies in dark bars and apartments until the sun rose and the sun went down again. She slept off hangovers in parks, under trees, umbrellas, a book splayed over her face, music always in her ears and smoke always on her cheek. Maura used to call herself shy, then she met Amelia, and Lacey, and Carmen and they called her dignified, statuesque, romantic, and other words Maura had used to describe herself to herself and had only ever dreamed of hearing spoken back to her. In New York Maura was coming into definition, no longer the negative space to Ainsley’s thick, dark line. But there was also the uncomfortable truth

that Ainsley was more present now that Maura was gone than she had ever been before. This was what Maura was trying to explain.

“Ainsley believed — believes — that the arrival of significant people in our lives is always an unmistakable event, because those meetings will always be marked by an uptick in moments of divine coincidence. She calls these synchronicities ‘signs’. And it really felt like that’s what happened. Like Ainsley was with me, or something. For example, the first job I got I interviewed with a woman named Ellis. Ainsley’s last name, obviously. And Ellis is a variation on Elijah. Ainsley and I used to have a joke about Elijah. I guess it’s not really a joke, but if there was a chair left empty or something we would say it’s for Elijah. So it was continuing this extended metaphor of Ainsley being there without being there.”

The first time Maura and Ainsley ever talked about signs was in Maine. “They’re like little whispers from Angels.” This was Ainsley. “They happen when you and that person were supposed to meet, I think.”

They were sitting in Ainsley’s parked car in front of an Airbnb in Portland, Maine. It was their second year of college and their first trip together. They hadn’t been dating at the time. Maura was still straight as far as she knew and Ainsley was her close friend that made her blush a lot. Ainsley was tapping her rings on the steering wheel and looking up and away as she did when she was saying something that made her feel vulnerable. A silence fell. Maura did not know what Ainsley meant but she did know she wanted Ainsley to keep talking.

“Do you believe in God, then?”

Ainsley looked down at her lap and back up at the Airbnb, a clapboard house that had seemed homey on the app but whose recessed lighting and wan, linoleum imitation of hardwood flooring

had prompted Ainsley to call it 'live laugh love chic'. Ainsley's face did not change. "I guess I do. How weird."

In Los Angeles, Maura speaks into her wine glass. "Then I went through this long period of asking for something and receiving it very soon afterward. So, like, when I moved into my place I had everything set up but I couldn't find a trash can. And my apartment doesn't have many places you can hide things, so I knew it needed to look good in the space." Linda nods at this so profusely that Maura half expects her tongue to loll out the side of her mouth.

Maura and Ainsley had agreed a long time ago that they would not discuss their dating lives with each other when they caught up. However, the result of this cogent and direct conversation had been the amorphous feeling that when they did speak it was still as a couple. Maura had been angered by her own surprise when, over the phone on New Year's Eve, Ainsley had told her that Linda would be joining them for almost every activity during Maura's visit.

"I would have said something earlier but, you know, we weren't really sure where it was going."

Maura was pacing her kitchen, a wooden spoon half-red with tomato sauce in one hand. "And you do now?" A pause on the other end of the line that made Maura roll her eyes so hard it hurt.

"More so."

"Oh."

"If it's too weird for you I can ask her not to." A long pause. Then, "But I'm kind of in the dog house as it is."

Maura closed her eyes, thought about not saying it, scratched her head with the hand holding the spoon. Without opening them:

"So it's been three months already?"

The silence on the other end of the phone was heavy.

“That’s not funny.”

“But it is, Ainsley. Because I’m right.”

Later that night on a train to the city Carmen and Maura gripped the overhead bar. They were heading to a New Year’s party being held on someone’s roof somewhere downtown.

“I don’t know why I was surprised.”

Carmen frowned. “Are they that serious?”

A group of NYU students in high heels piled on at the next stop. Maura pulled out her mask and fit the loops over her ears. “Ainsley’s always serious.” She watched one of the girls slide her eyes around the train car, loose and drunken and unseeing. “It seems like there’s a lot of drama. Jealousy. I think it’s this girl’s first lesbian relationship.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s kind of her thing, right?”

Maura smirked, but a pang of something close to anger bloomed inside her stomach. It was true, Ainsley was notorious for dating straight girls. Or, girls who thought they were straight. Maura used to wonder why men were so easy to dispose of. At first she’d tried to push back against the accusations of coldness, aloofness, and hard-heartedness, but after a few too many easy break-ups she’d been forced to accept that the accusations might be true. Lovers and boyfriends came and went as Maura pleased without much emotional fallout until she had the reputation of a bitch and a heartbreaker. When Maura met Ainsley she found herself uncomfortably on the other side. The idea that Ainsley might slip away as easily as Maura had let the others made her sick and clammy with panic. So, Maura became a woman of faith. From the moment she and Ainsley first kissed on an early morning in May, both sitting on the edge of the loading dock outside the campus center, Maura had something to lose. Her search for affirmation

became obsessive and ritualistic, conducted in desperate nights spent sleepless and pleading with God to send her signs that this was as important as it felt. It never occurred to her to ask Ainsley for this affirmation. Her dialogue with the universe was personal, she argued. What she did not want to acknowledge just yet was that Maura knew Ainsley well enough to know that nothing would drive her away faster than the idea that Maura could not take care of herself.

If any of these prayers were answered, it was lost on Maura. If any signs had tried to make their way through, they were drowned out by the static of their relationship. From beginning to end it was a snow-filled roar of bad faith interpretations, silently keeping score, and the intensity that comes with wanting to love someone when you suspect that you can't. In the end, Maura could not point to many instances of true, overt synchronicity while she was with Ainsley, but those first months in New York post-Ainsley had been rife with them, like the channels had cleared as soon as they broke apart. Now Maura saw Ainsley everywhere.

“And then I found a trash can outside my front door the next day, on my street. A cute one. And that happened a few more times. Small things I needed would just appear. Like she was sending them to me.”

In the low light Linda's cartoonish expressions are beginning to take on a demonic aura, the whites of her eyes peeking out from underneath her irises. Maura wonders if she is sensing an undercurrent of condescension. Maybe Linda's enthusiasm is a protective device, the kind of aggressive placating usually reserved for when one is confronted by a threat on a dark street.

“I ended up living on Ainslie street in Williamsburg. I passed by a ‘for rent’ sign in the window of this beautiful building and I called the number on impulse. Turns out the agent had just finished giving a tour so I went right up to see it. I signed the lease that day, without a roommate, even. I felt that there was no way it wouldn't work out.”



Maura has not told Ainsley any of this before. Ainsley had noted the street when she'd come to stay with Maura in August but Maura had brushed it off with a laugh and something glib about Ainsley and her God talk. On the patio, Maura looks at Ainsley and searches for her eyes in the flickering dark behind her glasses. She finds it quickly. It's a ringing stillness that lets Maura know her words are leaving her mouth and landing in Ainsley's mind the same way rain in LA turns to snow in the mountains; the same material is warped by a different climate until it is not really the same at all. With Ainsley, Maura could never escape misinterpretation. It occurs to Maura that she could be speaking to no one.

Twenty minutes later Ainsley, Maura, and Linda stand together on the pavement outside. The road is sharp, dark incline. An orange street light absconded in the branches of a walnut tree illuminates them from overhead, its light flickering across their faces as the leaves wave. The conclusion of Maura's monologue had been received with a few smiles and nods before the conversation moved on for eight more minutes. Then, twelve minutes ago, Hailey had yawned conspicuously, stood up, and kicked everyone off her patio.

Ainsley puts her hands in her pockets and tips her head up to Linda. "I'll drop Maura off at home and meet you at yours?"

Linda nods. "Okay. Sure." She turns her big, green eyes to Maura's.

Linda pulls Maura to her chest so tightly that she hits Maura's throat with her boney shoulder and Maura coughs against her will. Whispered in her ear, her grip a little too tight:

"It was so nice to finally meet you."

Maura feels a wash of pity fall through her as she remembers sitting across a low table at some Moroccan restaurant in Chinatown while Alice and Ainsley touched knees and laughed loudly about events for which Maura had not been present. Then, Ainsley's hand had laid stiffly

across Maura's lap. It was a gesture that struck Maura as perfunctory now but had felt like a lifeline at the time. Linda's hug is full of desperation, its tightness and duration begs Maura not to take Ainsley away from her. Maura wishes she could tell Linda that it isn't Maura she needs to be pleading with, and that in many ways it is too late, but she says nothing. She suspects Ainsley has laid her groundwork well enough that none of this will occur to Linda until much later, if at all. Maura glances at Ainsley with a kind of ironic admonishment as Linda walks away. Ainsley does not find this charming.

“Do you have something on your mind?”

“Yeah. Your shoe's untied.”

Ainsley's last visit to New York had seemed impulsive. It overlapped with a trip she had planned to drive up to Lola's house upstate with Lola and her husband. Maura had texted Lola asking if she could bring Ainsley, knowing Lola would say yes because she'd heard the whole story and wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity to facilitate drama. At the time Maura had feigned a light air of being inconvenienced, but in reality she was excited. She couldn't think of a better way to show Ainsley her new life, how different and perfect it was. Goosebumps traveled up Maura's neck at the thought of showing off Lola, the gorgeous actress who grew up between France and upstate New York, whose parents were professors, whom Maura had made out with once. When Ainsley stuttered her own name while shaking hands with Lola on the street corner near Maura's apartment, Maura had been filled with a feeling of such endless generosity and benevolence that she thought she might explode. Maura placed a hand on the shoulder of each girl, smiled, and said something about getting oysters.

The next day the four of them were in Ghent — Maura, Ainsley, Lola, and Lola's handsome if boring husband, Theo. The house was sprawling and old, warped wooden floors and

uneven doorframes with intricate molding. It was perfect, a caricature of an upstate house. Lola and Theo went to bed early on the first night, leaving Maura and Ainsley alone on the porch. They finished a bottle of wine together and Maura sweat crescent moons under her arms. The porch was set into a short swath of yard and looked out over the street beyond. The sound of toads echoed up the street from the bottom of the hill. Ainsley looked up at the water tower across the park, ghostly in the moonlight, four thin legs supporting a fat, squat head.

“My mom still misses you. It’s funny sometimes. Exasperating. A little sad.”

When Maura drank, the smell of orange blossoms and night blooming jasmine filled her nostrils no matter where she was. She told Ainsley this. Ainsley blinked, the moon reflected in her glasses.

“That’s the ghost of LA,” she said. She’s haunting you.”

In the guest bedroom Ainsley took time to trace the outlines of the tattoos on Maura’s naked back and stomach like she was greeting old friends. “I don’t know if I’ll ever see them again,” she’d said, her voice thick with something. Maura moved backwards and craned her neck to take in the shape of Ainsley’s face in the light from the window. She could almost see the way Ainsley’s eyes would now be widening and deepening into pools of sadness, pools she would swim in alone. It was a look Maura had seen before their first kiss outside the Airbnb in Maine and on the night Maura told her she wanted to move to New York. The only thing to do was stay still, become invisible if possible. Attempt to understand and she’d be admonished for her neediness. Mirror with her own retraction and she’d be accused of incurable diffidence. Of course, never in so many words, but in a trap door of a question or an inference about her character couched in some anecdote. Always deployed later, when it would hurt more.

Maura couldn't help herself. Hand still on Ainsley's shoulder: "Aren't you seeing someone?"

Ainsley went still. She slumped down on one elbow and moved her body backwards.

"Why do you say that?"

"I hear things. I always hear things about you, even when I don't want to."

"I see. Well, you're right. But it's not serious."

A giddy and melancholic pain flooded Maura's chest and surged upward to her eyes, which began to water. Ainsley stared back at her with a taunting impassivity.

"Does she know that?"

The only other time Ainsley and Maura had intersected in New York aside from Lola's house had been at Ainsley's birthday in 2015, three months into dating. The trip had been ostensibly for Maura's birthday, though it had been Ainsley's idea and Ainsley who had been insistent that they go on a certain date despite the fact that it would mean Maura missing a week at her new job. The plans became complicated and Ainsley became curt and Maura finally insisted that Ainsley go ahead without her. She would meet up at the weekend, meaning Ainsley would have three days alone. Maura let some time go by before she asked if Ainsley was going to see Alice.

"It's possible," Ainsley was hunched over, trying to open a bottle of wine. "She still lives there."

If it had been two years later, Maura would have replied with "Yeah, but are you going to see her on purpose?" Instead, Maura had said "Okay," and opened the cabinet, looking for glasses. Ainsley stopped her struggle with the shitty wine key and looked up.

"Does that make you feel insecure?"

Maura paused, retracting her arms from the cabinet. “I don’t know. Maybe a little.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Maura seemed to inspect the wine glasses for smudges. “She’s your ex. It’s only natural.” (If it were a year or two later, “I swear, you’re in too much fucking analysis.”) Ainsley assured her there was nothing to be insecure about, but they could talk about it and process that feeling as much as Maura needed. Maura nodded gratefully. She was always so grateful back then.

Ainsley stopped responding to Maura’s texts as soon as she touched down at JFK. Maura tried calling, then Instagram, even Facebook Messenger, but Ainsley had gone dark. Maura was spared an awkward phone call with Alice, who she was going to try next, when Ainsley finally called her back at eleven pm LA time on the second night.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

Maura was sitting on the toilet seat in her parents’ bathroom. She was at a dinner for her sister’s engagement. Later, Maura wondered if Ainsley had premeditated this timing.

“No. But I need some time alone. To...”

Here, there had a been a long pause. Maura would come to recognize these pauses as strategic, a way for Ainsley to avoid saying something for which she might later be held accountable. That night Maura was more than happy to oblige.

“To figure some things out?”

Maura relocated with little grace from the toilet to the tub, slipping on the ceramic sides until she was lying almost fully prostrate.

“I think being here has been really intense. Just a lot of stuff from my past is coming up. I don’t know if I have the space for...”

The tears Maura had been blinking back since she answered the phone came spilling down her face.

“For me. Space for me,” she’d said. Pitiful, choked.

Maura heard a truck passing in the background of the call. Ainsley was outside. Somehow this made everything worse. The casualness of an outside phone call, the implied inside just-nearby that Ainsley had stepped out of and would duck back into after she hung up. Like Maura was her child. Like she was calling on a fucking cigarette break.

It would come out a month later that Ainsley had slept with Alice the night she’d arrived in New York. How they’d reconciled was still something of a blur to Maura, so entangled was it with other ongoing, smaller rituals she’d begun enacting in order to become someone who meant something to Ainsley. How different was this concession to any other? They had only been together a few months but Maura already felt she would do anything to make Ainsley stay.

The passing street lights cast Ainsley in orange staccato as they drive down Sunset Boulevard, empty now save the jam-packed sidewalk outside El Prado and the cluster of tents and encampments near the bridge. The pandemic is in evidence on Los Angeles’ sleeve everywhere Maura looks, from the still-boarded up shop windows to massive, behemoth developments erected in neighborhoods of single-family homes. It seems that in its attempts to avoid acknowledging death, Los Angeles had sacrificed any pretense at beauty. Maura feels vindicated and hollow. She had always hated it here.

“The trick with words is, if you say them enough they become true,” Maura had said to Ainsley once. To which Ainsley had replied, “No they don’t. Words are just words.”

As they pull up to the curb outside her aunt’s house Maura’s heart begins to race. Ainsley puts the car into park and they idle. There is a long pause. Maura can feel Ainsley watching her.

It tumbles out, a clumsy, “It was good to meet Linda.” Ainsley smiles beatifically and something breaks, sending sweat to Maura’s palms and blood to her face. She feels like she has lost some unspoken game that she and Ainsley might have been playing all night. Maura unbuckles her seatbelt and reaches to the floor of the passenger’s seat for her purse, ready to leave and lick her wounds in her aunt’s attic bedroom, but when she looks back up Ainsley’s face has changed. Her lips are downturned, there is a redness in her nose and it looks like she’s about to cry. Maura stops and watches Ainsley inside her signature bottomless sorrow. She is as unsinkable as the Titanic and as tragically insistent in her own steadfastness.

“Was it?”

*Was it?* “No. Of course it wasn’t.”

Another silence, this one sharper. Instead of looking down in shame or leaving the car and going inside, Maura stays. She does not avert her gaze from Ainsley’s and something different happens: displeasure begins to corrupt Ainsley’s face. It crawls in furls, curdling the purity of her sadness into something more solid and less forgiving. *Something needs to happen.* It comes to her like a whisper from the future. If Maura does not do something to punctuate this night, to mark an ending, then Ainsley’s echo will never leave her alone. For the rest of her life Maura will live on streets bearing her name, hear about her lovers from strangers in dark bars, see the flash of her round face in the windows of passing taxis. The thought makes her ache.

Placing her purse back on the floor, Maura reaches to her collar and loosens the top button of her white shirt. “Here,” she says. It is almost ceremonial. She smiles as if to telegraph that the reason for this gesture is not sexual. Not directly, at least. A small laugh escapes Ainsley’s mouth. Maura undoes the last button and turns around, allowing the shirt to fall from her shoulders and her back to be lit under the muted orange of the streetlight overhead. There is a

long silence and Maura wonders if they are too far gone, if whatever they had was so forgettable after all and this night has been Maura performing some sick, Frankenstein-like reanimation of a corpse that was better left buried, that had been buried a long time. She jumps as she feels Ainsley's cold hand reach and touch what must be the octopus. Ainsley reacts to her surprise, retracting with a muttered "Sorry". Maura shakes her head. Another pause. Ainsley lowers her hand again and traces her fingers lightly along the rest (a heart, a faded stick and poke invoking expired college allegiances, a line drawing, whatever else). The gesture from August is repeated as a mutual phrase spoken by two silent people to mean the last time.