

Namaste My Friend

Water gushes off of me and droplets dapple my ankles as I climb out of the pool. I'm not Catholic but I still believe in ritual. The idea came from a book where a character self-baptizes to start anew. I dry off and walk upstairs. The stairwell fills with the smell of chlorine. Each floor of our apartment complex is connected by an open-air Spanish courtyard. They look great in online ads, but in person they resemble a low-budget New Orleans set.

I shower and get dressed while my girlfriend, Rachel, sleeps. The kitchen, downstairs, is a disaster. The counter is littered with cat food cans, some still half-empty, others in precarious towers. Plates of rotting food fill the sink. The refrigerator is empty except for old take-out quarts and a container of yogurt, but I save that for Rachel. Rachel doesn't clean up after herself anymore and I don't either. The state of the kitchen sends her into bimonthly panic attacks, but so does cleaning it. It's always a mess a day later anyway.

Maybe a cup of coffee will be enough. I start the coffee machine and clear the cans into a garbage bag. I open the window and the hum of Sunset's traffic fills the apartment. The garbage bins below sit nestled in the alley's shade, there's a soft quality to the light that I only notice in the morning and evening. Whatever troubles we might have thrust upon it, LA is still beautiful. Rachel stirs upstairs and the shower screeches on.

I finish cleaning before Rachel stomps down the stairs, blonde hair pasted in tendrils to her collar-bone and shoulders. She's in short shorts and a tank top that elevates her breasts well-beyond normal perkiness—a sight that initially mesmerized me. She's from a dying town in Massachusetts and is far too shy to ever consider acting despite moving here. She sends dishes clattering as she digs through the sink. She sighs. She's most anxious in early morning and late night, in those hours when life's distractions dry up and you're left with only yourself.

Rachel takes her coffee to the couch without saying thank you. I almost say something but soon she's cuddled beside me, spooning her yogurt into my mouth while the TV drones on about a slow speed car chase. She squeezes my arm and we're in love again. When we finish the yogurt she starts scrolling through emails. I've spent entire dinners with her face lit by her phone.

"I can't believe this asshole cancelled. Now I have to book someone else for tonight's show," she says, standing up abruptly and walking into the kitchen.

"Who cancelled?" I ask but she just walks upstairs. While she's gone I walk to the corner and buy smoothies. Mine is oversweet and makes my stomach churn. I should use this time to meditate or do yoga, but instead I waste money on so-called health-food. Just as I hit the bottom and my straw makes that slurping sound Rachel returns downstairs, wearing a white blouse and yellow pencil skirt.

"We're going to be late," she says.

"Here," I say and hand her a banana-strawberry smoothie. Her cheeks pull in the way they do when she pretends to be a fashion model. "Gorgeous, darling, gorgeous," I say but she doesn't laugh.

"Thanks."

We rush through the over-bright courtyard and Rachel's heels clomp hollowly along the tile. We had separate cars until a week ago when Rachel totaled hers in stop and go traffic on the Five. She was out late drinking the night before but insists she didn't fall asleep. Either way, she left her foot on the gas and wedged her car under the SUV in front of her. I don't even know why I care whether she fell asleep. I ought to believe her.

My car is parked tight to the curb and looks fine until glass crunches under my shoe. Someone broke my driver-side window. I open the door. Shattered glass fills the speedometer

shelf and covers my seat. My iPod's gone. The car's been broken into before but last time it was empty. I told myself that it was more frustrating that they broke in when there was nothing to steal, but now I see that was a lie.

I brush out the tiny squares of glass. The more I brush out, the angrier I get and soon I'm wishing they'd cut me but they're too dull. The last window cost two hundred to replace, which is more money I don't have. I sit and try to yell but it sounds all wrong, more like a whiney moan than a scream.

"It's okay, everything will be alright," Rachel says and I try not to think of how many times we've said those words to each other.

Her reassurance just makes me angry and I punch the steering wheel again and again.

"Stop, you're scaring me," she says. Each blow propels the next and soon I'm hitting it as hard as I can. The car's rocking and Rach is crying in the passenger seat. Occasionally I graze the horn and it squeaks out a tiny protest. Rachel slams the door behind her. Only then do I stop.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks. She sits under a palm tree's minor shade and cries. I've felt this way before in our fights. The way you feel before saying something irreparable, but even knowing that, you do anyway.

I follow my yoga teacher's advice to count breaths in difficult moments. One stupid fucking breath; two incredibly pointless breaths and so on—like a bitter outtake from a *Sesame Street* counting scene. But the breathing thing somehow works and whatever was squirming in me quiets.

"Come on, get back in," I say as soothingly as I can muster. "You'll be late."

"You're always like this now," she says.

We drive and the palm trees rise up alongside us in endless rows. Counting by men, she's cheated twice. By any other unit the math grows hazy. At this point, I've exhausted my close friends' sympathy with my constant rehashing of the story. They all say Rachel won't change, but she's apologized and promised to find a couple's therapist. She's said this but she hasn't done it. Whenever I mention it, we fight and she cries and somehow we end up sleeping together again. There's something humiliating about recognizing these cycles without being able to break out of them.

I worry someday I'll find that I've spent the last three years with a woman who doesn't love me, and that the next day, we'll be married with miserable children and a day later, we'll be dead, but then I worry that if I leave her I'll lose whatever bullshit spiritual lesson life's bundled up in her. In that tall, blond package of endless suffering.

A ripple of brake lights flares ahead and I stop. Rachel drops her compact.

"Fuck, why'd you do that?" she says.

"Everyone's stopping."

"The guy in front of you tapped his brakes."

"How would you know? You're putting makeup on," I say. "If you're such a good driver, you should drive."

"Hilarious, maybe I should book you."

"I'm *constantly* jealous of your job. Comedians seem so happy, so fulfilled," I say.

"At least they aren't a bunch of greedy snobs," she says.

"Don't forget *I'm* doing you a favor."

"Yeah, I'm so lucky."

We drive into Culver City, where the Laugh Factory office is, right beside a weird patch of strip mall with a movie theatre, a shitty Sushi place, and a glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course. The last, a setting where I've often pictured her coworkers (specifically the two she cheated on me with) kneeling behind her and instructing in front of child onlookers. The whole street could be sucked into the earth and all I'd want was for Jamie and Forrest to go with it.

Forrest moved to another comedy agency three months ago. I found out about him last year, that time I told myself it was a one-time thing, that it was just something that happened and it wasn't worth throwing everything away over, but I found her with Jamie two weeks ago. He's their IT guy and looks it, overweight and bearded. No one would expect her to cheat on me with him, but she did. Jamie's biggest advantage with her is that he isn't me, which means he doesn't flinch when she teases him, doesn't bristle when she calls him a faggot or tells him to get over it. He just laughs. I know, because that's what I used to do.

The fact that she barely hides these flings allows me to justify them as ploys for help but that doesn't convince anyone else. My friends say to judge her by her actions, not pretend there's more to her than what she's done. They say she mistakes male attention for self-worth, but they don't know her. Rachel's never told me what happened to her but she has alluded to some prior trauma and maybe that's why she twists any inconvenience into a full-blown tragedy. Every incident becomes an opportunity to purge some of the horribleness lodged inside her. Last week I tried to break up with her but she grew so hysterical that I couldn't help but mistake her hysteria as caring about me, maybe even loving me.

I drop her off and try not to imagine her chuckling with Jamie, try not to remember his belly pressed against her back, the way I found them together in our bed. Whatever they'd done long finished, he was just asleep beside her. I threw a shoe at him and he left sheepishly, leaving me with a rage that grew in pointlessness in the face of his continued absence.

Two hours later, and two hundred dollars more in debt, I walk into the gallery, the proud owner of a car with four windows. My boss, Randall shouts from the desk, “What the hell happened?” He’s hard to overlook, especially if you want to.

We’re preparing for tomorrow’s opening, so I spend my day arranging tiny, numbered pins in sequence and when I complete the sets, either by finding the missing digits or altering others to replace them, I press the pins into the wall beside the paintings to number the work. My thumbs bruise by the time I finish. I revise price lists and help Randall set prices for the bad work covering most of the walls. Almost every piece in the 30x40 size ends up at \$3900. Randall used to be a used-car salesman and his pricing schemes reflect it.

After work, I drive to Koreatown to help Eloise, my friend from yoga class, move. Like most of her friends, Eloise is an alt-model. It’s not something we’ve ever really discussed although she’s at ease with it, but her social media is covered with photos from shoots. Despite not necessarily wanting to, I’ve seen Eloise naked thanks to this. Some of her friends’ photos are too aggressive to ignore: asses and breasts squeezed in frame or angled for maximum effect, but Eloise’s are different. Regardless the photographer, they always shoot her like she’s the subject of a Bouguereau painting, forever innocent and lovely.

By the time I pull up to Eloise’s new place, the light is softening again and even the iron bars in the house’s windows glow. The porch sags to the left. Telling whether something is level is among the useless skills my art gallery career has bestowed on me. I park.

Eloise and another girl are already unloading the U-Haul. The girl has dark hair and tattoo-spotted arms. Eloise has always been blond, but she’s bleached her hair to the point of whiteness where it almost disappears into the white backdrop of the truck behind her. Eloise doesn’t look like a model. She’s five-one, and although pretty, only in photos does her beauty become apparent. She has the sort of expert facial control you wish for during introductions and job interviews.

“Hey,” Eloise says. “This is Talia.”

Talia’s limbs look like they were teased out of candle-wax. She smiles and shakes my hand. Her palm is warm and soft and her teeth are perfect. The tattoo on her arm is of a tree with falling leaves. It makes me want tattoos of my own. Eloise has said before that she could easily hook me up with one of her friends, but only now am I wishing that I took her seriously.

Eloise hands me a box and I follow her into the house. There’s wood floor and a pink claw-foot tub that Eloise must have loved when she first saw it.

“I can’t believe she did that,” Talia says.

“I know,” Eloise says. “It’s okay, this place is so much bigger anyways.”

“What?” I ask.

“My old roommate just disappeared but our friend found this video of her. She’s doing porn.” Eloise says the word with the same judgmental tone anyone else would.

“It’s hilarious, she wanted to be a librarian,” Talia says. “Not like a “too hot for teacher” librarian, but a real librarian. The problem was she did all these dumb satanic shoots using her real name, so anytime anyone googled her they’d find pictures of her covered in blood.”

“I didn’t know she was stupid, okay?” Eloise says.

I set the box in her room. Her cat coils up in it with his head hanging out, in one of those awkward poses that almost ensures a subsequent fall. The box is filled with photos of Eloise in front of an assortment of the “world’s largest” variety of landmarks. There’s one of her in front of a giant hotdog outside of Alabama, practically beaming. She organizes her cross-country trips so that she can shoot everywhere through the summer while stopping at landmarks in her spare time.

We unload the truck as swiftly as possible. I try not to fawn over Talia too much, distributing my help evenly between the girls. By the time we finish, the sky is cobalt and the cars driving along the highway below are just yellow-red streaks. I've missed two calls from Rachel. Usually, she's the one missing my calls.

Eloise passes me a beer and we sit on her couch. She seems happy and I try to avoid comparing this with how upset Rachel was throughout our move.

"How's work?" Eloise asks.

"Eh, still not making money," I say.

"Still with that girl?"

"Yeah." I swallow.

"She cheated again, huh?"

I finish the first beer and she passes me another. "I found her with this dude she works with, fat and almost forty and at that point of baldness where he's growing a beard as a last ditch effort to hang onto *some* hair." They stare and I worry that I've sounded cruel.

"Fuck," they finally say in chorus.

"We don't have to talk about it," Talia says and pats my knee. A forgotten part of me comes alive and I'm suddenly aware of all the places where my jeans touch my legs.

"That's all there is to say."

"Except for the obvious," Eloise says. "When will you break up?"

"When we don't need each other anymore," I say.

I brace for them to ask how I could possibly need someone who cheats on me but Eloise and Talia start laughing and I laugh along, like it's a joke. I invite them to the gallery opening

and leave to pick up Rachel. The gallery sell's JT Wilder prints we find on the secondary market, he usually draws bleeding stuffed animals and cartoon-styled portraits of presidents. He's Eloise's favorite artist.

On opening nights I park my car as far from the gallery as possible. This feels almost natural since the parking lot is usually full. I don't want anyone to see my car. Usually, this doesn't bother me but tonight it does. Randall says art buyers won't trust someone driving a Civic. The fuchsia sky is dotted with baby-blue clouds.

The gallery is part of a complex of twenty-two other galleries housed in an abandoned train station. We host our openings in sync with the most popular galleries to bolster our turnout. We have a list of 8,000 art buyers, but most of them are just people who signed up legibly enough on the sign-up sheets we have in the gallery or interior designers whose emails we've added without permission, it's certainly not a list of vetted collectors. Most of our invitations go unopened, but our openings are always full and Randall usually seems impossibly happy so he must be making money.

A man boasts to his date that he'll buy something, but I ignore him. Those types are to be avoided. People on dates in galleries are after the illusion of sophistication, not art. I shake Randall's hand. He squeezes mine as if he still has something to prove to me. His Rolex gleams. Only beside him do I feel so cheap and disposable, like there's nothing to life beyond money.

I position myself beside the price lists in the main gallery. I used to try working the room during openings but all it ever did was exhaust me. It's better to remain visible and wait.

Talia and Eloise walk in. Talia is in a white summer dress that highlights the inkiness of her tattoos and Eloise is in a red dress with Hello Kitty logos plastered across the chest in a stream of cuteness that people pretend to examine while they check her out.

Talia hugs me first but I keep my butt out awkwardly. My hug with Eloise feels natural which makes me wish we'd hugged first. For a second, I imagine Rachel was here but it wouldn't be worth the repercussions. Her absurd level of jealousy should have been my first hint. Only someone who is cheating or considering it could ever be so jealous.

"How much are these?" Eloise asks, standing before a JT Wilder print of JFK shaking hands with a Teddy-bear as the president's brains leak out.

"This one is forty-four hundred," Randall says proudly.

"We bought that off EBay for a third of the price," I whisper into Eloise's ear. Talia leans in. I repeat myself to her. She smells like coconut and peroxide. She shakes her head and laughs. It's a sound that could change my life.

From over Talia's shoulder, I watch Rachel walk into the gallery. She never comes to my openings, but here she is. She must have had someone drop her off. Rachel's usual crowd-shocked expression tightens further, lips straining to corral her fear, if Talia and Eloise weren't here I'd have a chance of soothing Rachel but I know that her anxiety will turn into rage as soon as she spots them. Rachel has a red dress on, high in the front, and cut in a deep V down her back. I brace for her as she approaches but, feet away, she veers off and stomps away.

"Excuse me," I say.

Eloise whispers something to Talia as I walk away. Our bar is setup around the corner. The gallery is laid out in a large L, with the office in the corner where the two walls meet. We call it a bar but really it's just a folding table with a black tablecloth and plastic vodka bottles under it.

The bartender, Jeff, pours a woman more Yellowtail. We don't serve red wine because, according to Randall, it's the only liquid that won't come out of a painting. Somehow he doesn't seem concerned by the cranberry juice we mix with vodka.

Rachel stops at the bar and gets a cranberry and vodka. Jeff says something to her and she laughs. He smiles at me as Rachel continues to walk away, to the far corner where we shove the worst work.

The paintings are made of multiple canvases bolted together. Rachel lingers between two. They're all pleasing earth-tones, fodder for interior designers. "Such texture," they'll say as if they know anything about art or even care about it.

When I finally reach Rachel I try to touch her shoulder but she pulls away.

"You don't want to stay with your new girlfriends?" she almost yells.

"You know Eloise is just my friend," I say in a hyper-reasonable tone.

"Who's the other one? You looked friendly with *her*."

"You're the one who needs to worry?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed but we're always fighting, so yes, I need to worry. Even when I come to your opening, you're fucking miserable."

For a second, I want to walk away from her and pretend that she isn't even here, but it passes and I stand beside her like this is a normal way for us to behave, and at this point, maybe it is.

People mill around us, offering up their imitations of what they believe viewing artwork should look like, and it's even more despicable than usual.

"So, what do you think of the show?" I strain the words out.

"I don't know anything about art," she says. "Don't try to make me look stupid."

Regardless how many times I complain about the gallery, it remains a daunting place for her. She says if I don't like it I should quit.

“You know what you like,” I say, a line I use with potential clients.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She turns away and I think, was she always this insane?

“It means you know the art that you like,” I say. She walks away, to the wall opposite us and joins a crowd gathered around a painting.

The crowd is only looking at each other, not the work, which makes me suspect they’re artists. Some artists offer incredibly insightful comments about artwork, but most of them are incredibly self-interested. What I mean is, Rachel’s found a group of peers. I consider leaving her with them and returning to the beautiful girls who visited me, the ones who still smile and look happy when they see me, but Rachel grabs my hand and pulls herself out of the crowd.

“You’re all dressed up,” she says and tousles my hair as though we haven’t been fighting, as though we haven’t been on the verge of breaking up for months and part of me leans into it.

I nod.

“So you’ll drive me to work tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I say. “When’s your aunt helping you get a car?” She pauses and I expect she’s going to yell.

Rachel looks at her phone and her eyes go blank. “Oh, Martin’s almost here. I’ll have to leave in a minute,” she says.

“Who’s Martin?” I ask. Her eyes go blank, disconnecting from her thoughts.

“He’s just a comedy agent. Not competition.” She winks.

“Well, try to have fun,” I say, my stomach clenching in a now-familiar knot.

“Of course, baby.” She kisses my cheek. “He’s just driving me to the showcase. I don’t want to strand you here.”

A woman mumbles something and tugs on my arm.

“What?” I ask.

She’s older and has diamond earrings. “My, these are shocking,” she says, gesturing to the paintings. I turn to say goodbye to Rachel but she’s already on her way out. The woman says something else but I’m distracted by the way Rachel’s muscles move along her back as she leaves. The palm trees’ silhouettes cut black into the darkening sky.

“Oh,” I say.

“But, my nephew would love them.” She smiles. “He’s sixteen, young enough to still like shock.” This room’s price range is from \$2,000 to \$6,000.

“Which one would he like best?” I ask, hopefully sounding neutral.

“Hmm,” she says, “maybe this one?” She points to a painting of a man in black, wearing a cowboy hat and sitting under a giant orange moon. He has a sphinx-like smile. Its price is \$5,250, which means that before a discount my commission would be \$525.

“That’s my favorite,” I say, knowing that whatever piece she chose would have been my favorite too.

“How much to ship it to New York?”

“I’ll get the owner. He’s great with shipping,” I say, but it’s really just so he can close the sale. Commission will remain mine.

The woman follows me through the crowd toward the office. Randall sits behind his desk smiling like an alligator that’s broken a lion’s neck in the shallows; this is his greeting for

potential clients. Talia and Eloise watch me from the gallery. I smile and Eloise clasps her hands before her like a grandmother about to play roulette for the first time.

A couple minutes later, Randall is shaking my hand as though I've never sold anything before. He pours us Macallan 18 and we toast. Randall stares at the girls but I don't look at him, I don't need to. His eyes always take on the same greedy glow post sale. Talia smiles at me as though five-hundred dollars isn't what she makes for an hour spent tangled in sheets. Perhaps she's just happy for me.

We leave in my car. Talia and Eloise don't drive, they Uber wherever they need to. Neither would keep a boyfriend as a chauffeur. Eloise plugs her phone into the stereo and MGMT's *Time to Pretend* comes on. She spins up the volume and they dance in their seats. We sing along, but I skip the line "find some models for wives."

We stop at Talia's, off the Hollywood strip, blocks from our apartment. From her window, I can see the familiar glow of In-N-Out's sign across the street. Talia and Eloise lie on the bed and I sit across from them in a rattan chair and for a moment, I feel triumphant.

"What now?" Talia asks and the feeling dwindles.

"I don't know." Eloise shrugs.

They turn to me and I wish again that I was someone with plans or ideas that interested people.

"The other night Swan and I called this guy she's dating and *tortured* him," Talia says. "We must have invited him over for a threesome five times. We knew he wouldn't do it. We kept offering up these ridiculous obstacles. Stuff like: our Korean landlord never lets us have visitors but she smokes outside all night long. If he had any balls he'd have been there in a heartbeat. He didn't even offer to sneak in."

Eloise says. “She’s still seeing Tim? The guy who does graphic design for insurance companies?”

“Yup, that’s him.”

“What if he came?” Eloise asks and watches me.

“I don’t know. We were pretty bored.”

I try to consider how I’d feel about this conversation if Talia weren’t gorgeous.

“So, how should we pass the time?” Talia asks.

I feel like I’m in a cartoon mirage, where a character wandering the desert stumbles on an oasis that will vanish as soon as he tries to drink from it. Just that feeling shouldn’t be enough to stop me, but it is. These girls are *beautiful*, yet I do nothing.

Talia rolls onto her stomach. Her thighs widen to a perfectly heart-shaped ass. I imagine what’s under her jeans and even that isn’t enough to embolden me. I stand up and get a glass of water from the kitchen. When I return to the room I sit on the bed. Talia pats the space beside her and I inch closer. Eloise is on Talia’s other side.

“What’s that tattoo?” I ask and point at the edge of a clover on the front of her shoulder.

Talia looks at me but doesn’t move.

“Oh, I’ll show you,” Eloise says. She cackles as she tries to pull Talia’s dress off. The girls roll across me, knees digging into me. Their smell and combined weight presses me into the bed and I freeze. In long relationships, you forget how tense these first moments can be.

“Maybe we should go out,” I say and they stop wrestling. “Some friends of mine are doing karaoke.”

A smile plays across Talia's thin but protuberant lips. "You'd rather do karaoke?" she asks, she leaves her lips parted.

"I don't know," I say.

"I'd rather not," Eloise says and tries to pull me back into bed as I stand.

I look out the window and watch the traffic light cycle. "I'll text when I get there if you want to come by."

Eloise raises an eyebrow but hugs me as if nothing has happened. Talia doesn't even bother to roll onto her back. She watches me from over her shoulder, her hips still pressing into the bed. That white dress could be pulled off so easily. She blows a kiss. "Enjoy Karaoke," she says, elongating the word in mockery.

I drive down Norman and catch what seems like every red light. I imagine Talia asking Eloise what's wrong with me. The asphalt glows pink then green then gold and the streets are empty. I should have done what anyone else would have done. Rachel wouldn't have hesitated in my shoes, but knowing that does nothing.

This is how my life could be if I could just leave her. I should turn around and go back, change the result into something other than disappointment. Break up with Rachel afterward. Reverse my life in one night.

Something hits my car door and rolls across my hood. The figure almost lands on their feet but stumbles. A bike clatters to the ground on my side of my car.

No one's around. I could drive off, but the man stands and waves his arms at me like a castaway. I shift the car into park and get out. My whole body vibrates with adrenaline.

"You okay?"

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” He rubs the hood of the car like an easily startled colt. He has a jacket over his t-shirt and loose, stained sweatpants. There’s a smell, maybe of liquor. “You’re fine. Car’s fine. Don’t need to tell anyone about this,” he says, his eyes fixed behind me.

“I don’t care about the car,” I say. “You’re a person.” I emphasize the word but it feels false.

He stretches back and burps. “Okay, okay. I’m fine.” He nods and I help him pick up his bike before he rides off. I imagine leaning my head against the steering wheel until another car pulls up and honks but I drive on. I drive the rest of the way like it’s a driving test. I park outside our building.

After the last time I caught her, insane as it is, I always call. She doesn’t answer. I picture her in bed, asleep and innocent to all that she’s done to us, all that we’ve done to each other. I walk up through the empty, faux-Spanish courtyards, where the only sound is the thin patter of water falling into the perpetually algae-clumped fountains. I reach our balcony door and knock. She doesn’t answer.

Laughter and splashing comes from the pool below. I watch the couple swim. Their movements send the pool rippling and the reflected light bends and warbles along the apartment walls. They seem so happy. I open our door and a bar of moonlight thickens across our empty bed. I lie and wait for Rachel to come home.