

Scenes From A Love Story

I: A Family Dinner

Peter is lying on the bed, and his head hangs off the edge with his feet against the wall. His hair brushes the floor. He is looking at the etched pencil marks in the doorway that stop at six-foot-three. The last one was drawn by his mother twelve years ago after he graduated high school. As a child, Peter thought he would grow up to be seven feet tall.

A breeze blows through the window, rustling the curtains. He hears his mother rasping something about dinner. His father calls back to her from the patio where he is barbecuing the appetizers. Peter inhales a mixture of the April air, saturated with pollen and warmth and the smell of the chicken cooking on the grill. There is a light scent of cherry tobacco from his father's pipe.

"Peter."

His mother appears in the doorway, holding a dishrag in her hand. She startles Peter who didn't hear her coming up the stairs. His mother rolls her eyes and tosses the rag at Peter. He sits up.

"I need help with the dishes," she says. "People are arriving in thirty minutes."

Peter nods. His mother looks around his childhood room before heading back down the hall. He gets up, letting the muscles in his legs adjust to the weight of standing. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror above his dresser. His hair is dirty, too long, and he's been wearing the same T-shirt for days. It smells like the sweat has fermented under his armpits. He takes the shirt off and walks over to the suitcase pushed up against the wall, but he can't bring himself to open it. He stuffs the dishrag in his back pocket and walks into his parents' room. He grabs one of his father's expensive Hawaiian shirts and puts it on, buttoning it as he makes his way to the kitchen.

"Of course the dishwasher had to break this morning," his mother says when he enters the kitchen. She's been saying this all day. She's leaning over the sink, scrubbing a fork. She sighs.

"Terrible," Peter says. He wonders if he sounds sincere.

"Is that your father's shirt?" she says. "Fine. Anyway, you do this and then set the table. I need to finish making the salad."

Peter begins by drying the spoons and forks that have already been washed. He looks at his reflection as he dries a large, silver serving spoon. He sticks out his tongue.

“Peter, please,” his mother says. He sees her cross her arms in the mirror of the spoon.
“Can you hurry up?”

“Sorry,” he says.

Peter has been acting stunned, immobilized, since he arrived last Friday evening. It seems all he’s been able to do is float through the days, not really thinking about anything or moving much. He has no more vacation time after next week, and this thought makes him think of his office which is full of items that remind him of Jane. The spider plant she gave him in the ceramic pot she painted; the photo of them in the vintage frame she found at the farmer’s market; the good pens she bought him and told him to hide when he complained about everyone always stealing the pens that sit in the mug—also given to him by Jane—on top of his desk. His stomach feels tight.

“Have you talked at all?” His mother asks him.

“No,” he says.

“I drove by your apartment last night,” his mother says. She hesitates. “Her car wasn’t there.”

He pictures his charming, two-story brick building that sits at the top of a hill with a larger hill behind it. He loves that apartment but he knows he’ll have to move once Jane has left. He can’t stand the idea of being there without her. She messaged him to say she’ll be out before next weekend if he can wait. He could, he told her. He could always wait for Jane.

“She’s works Saturdays, you know,” he says.

His mother sighs. She keeps sighing, he’s noticed. She sighs again when it’s clear he’s not going to say anymore. Right then his father comes in the back door at the other end of the kitchen. He walks over to the sink and Peter steps to the side as his father runs his hands under the water.

“That’s my shirt,” his father says.

“I couldn’t get my suitcase to open,” Peter says.

His father raises an eyebrow and then turns to his wife. She purses her lips at her husband.

“When’s your family coming?” his father says.

“5:30,” his mother says.

“I better go change then.” He points to a red stain on his powder blue shirt. “Marinade got me.”

He slaps Peter on the back with a wet hand and walks out of the kitchen, rubbing his palms on his jeans. His mother is quiet for a minute.

“Your father and I split up when we first starting dating, you know. These things happen.”

Peter’s thirtieth birthday was in March, and he proposed to Jane at his birthday dinner.

“You’ve told me this before, Mom.” He plunges his hands into the soapy water.

“She could change her mind. Maybe you two just need to talk.” She sighs and Peter shudders at the sound of it. “We’re fond of Jane.”

“Sure,” he says, placing a wet glass on the draining board.

“But she doesn’t have much direction. You have a little more ambition, Peter. Maybe this is for the best.”

“Mm-hmm,” he says.

“You’re more mature.” She adds sliced strawberries to the salad and cracks black peppercorn over the bowl.

“Okay, Mom.”

“It’s true. You’ve always been that way, you know. And she’s a bit, well, aimless.”

“She works,” he says. His mother scoffs.

“Hardly a reliable job. I still don’t understand why she quit the music school.”

“I’ve told you, there were parents bullying her. They blamed her for their kids not advancing.”

“Well, if it was more than one family, maybe there’s some truth to it.”

“Mom, she does weddings every weekend. I honestly can’t remember the last time we spent a Saturday night together. Fridays and Sundays can be busy too.”

“There you go,” she says. “Maybe that’s the problem. She’s putting her career first.”

“I thought she was ‘aimless’ and shouldn’t have quit the school?” Peter pulls his hands from the water and turns to face his mother.

“It’s just an observation, no need to be defensive,” she says.

“No, it’s not just an observation,” he says. “You could have been nicer to her.”

“Honey, she’s got, you know, issues,” she says. “She takes antidepressants. I just want what’s best for you.”

“Everyone’s on antidepressants,” he says.

“No, not everyone,” she says. “And anyway, all I’m saying is you could find someone a little healthier. Someone who doesn’t work an opposite schedule, and who is appreciative of all the wonderful things you provide. You’ve always supported her lifestyle, and frankly, I don’t think she shows you enough gratitude.”

“We split the bills, Mom.”

“Who pays more?”

“I make more,” he says.

“Exactly.”

“You’ve never worked,” he says. “Dad pays for everything.”

“That’s a completely different situation,” she says.

“How?” She eyes the dishes still waiting to be washed.

“Peter, finish the dishes, we can revisit this conversation another time.”

“No,” he says. “I’d like to understand how it’s fine for you but not Jane.”

“Well, for starters, we’re married. Our situation was, and is, very different. She’s terrified of commitment and I wasn’t in the slightest. I couldn’t wait to marry your father. And who wouldn’t want to marry you?”

Now Peter sighs. For the first time in days, he allows himself to think of Jane. He pictures her dyed blond hair that stops at her shoulders. Her dark eyes. Her skinny arms and legs and everything. Her violin and sloppy, handwritten compositions dispersed in random spots around the apartment. Her jeans with the worn knees, her love of plants, the delicate gold hoop in her nose, the flowers tattooed along the inside of her arm that she often conceals with long sleeves. She doesn’t parade her kindness—she’s too quiet for this. It’s displayed instead in small

actions. She doesn't eat animals. She cleans the old lady's apartment at the bottom of the road for free. She always makes him coffee in the mornings while he battles his alarm for more sleep.

"Peter," his father says. He's back in the kitchen, wearing a Hawaiian shirt similar to the one Peter has on. "Your suitcase isn't broken. I opened it for you."

"Oh," Peter says. "Thanks."

He and his mother exchange a glance as his father crosses the room and exits back onto the patio. He thinks she might speak but she doesn't. Instead, she sighs. Peter finishes washing the dishes in the sink. Then he dries everything. He is sure not to look at his reflection in any of the silverware.

II: A Road Trip, Before Peter

Jane sits on the edge of a worn mattress and flips through the channels on the TV. Her expression is indifferent, clinical. Outside her room, crimson leaves fold with the wind. Their movement catches her eye and she turns her attention from the television to the window. Some of the dancing leaves land in the pool that is still uncovered despite the changing of the seasons. In her periphery, she sees clumps of dark hair littered across the bathroom floor, freshly chopped by a pair of manicure scissors. This hair is no longer hers. She touches her scalp with a tenderness one might show to an ill child when checking their forehead for a temperature. She sets the remote on the bed and walks to the door. She opens it and leans into the wooden frame, easing her spine along the doorway.

The pavement runs with streams of mud that have migrated from the flower beds. The rain is letting up a little but she wishes it would stop; she'd like to swim. Perhaps, she thinks, it's better that it's raining. She pictures all the travelers, secluded in their rooms thanks to the rain, watching her in the pool. People—men—who haven't seen a naked woman in years, her swimsuit tight enough for them to pretend it's not there. Though she's not certain anyone else is actually at the motel. Something the clerk said earlier, when she was checking in, made her think she might be the only person here. What did he say? She can't remember, but the look he'd given her as she bent down to retrieve her ID from her bag made her feel slightly sick. In fact, it was one of the factors that sparked the impromptu urge to cut her hair.

She envisions the clerk pulling back the curtain in his office, sweat rolling down his cheeks and catching in the corners of his mouth. She pictures him watching her in the doorway with the binoculars he's had since he was twelve while he digs in his pants. She imagines it's sunny out and he's watching her shut the door to her room as she heads to the pool. In her fantasy, he watches her jiggle the handle, twice, to make sure the door's locked behind her. He watches her run her fingers through her hair, watches as her hands trace the hair that is no longer there because she's forgotten she cut it. He watches her take off her oversized T-shirt and notices that she doesn't bother to fold it, just tosses it onto the rubber seat of a lounge chair. He sees her dip her foot in the water, testing it before jumping in. He waits for her to get out of the pool, her swimsuit clinging to her damp skin.

She anticipates him going through these motions and suddenly she wants him to watch her. She is anxious for the rain to stop. She thinks of the motel clerk and tries to recall the name on his shirt. Andrew? Ray? No, Dean. She remembers. The wind makes her shiver and she shuts the door and walks back to the bed, then wonders if maybe she should keep the door open. Maybe Dean would take an open door as a gesture of friendliness. Maybe he would be smart enough to bring a condom just in case. She hopes he is not one of those guys who carries around a single, ancient condom in his wallet. But he looked like the kind of man who would be prepared. He probably fantasizes about women like her all the time. Women in their mid-twenties who could pass for younger, who leave their motel doors open in hopes that they will lure the stocky, leather-skinned, graying men who run these sorts of joints into their rooms. Maybe she'll even get a discount if she lets Dean sleep with her. She's short on money and he probably hasn't been laid in years. He might be rough. Cruel. Then again, he's probably married.

Maybe he's nice and gentle underneath the hard exterior he wears as a costume. She imagines that he doesn't smell like dirt and sweat and stale tobacco, but like soap and laundry detergent. She thinks of the stories he will tell her when they're through and the questions he will ask her. Where are you going? Where are you from? He doesn't realize she's heading home, not starting out, and that she's been traveling for almost three days straight, trying to get back home for her closest friend's funeral who died of a brain aneurysm on Saturday. She won't tell Dean this stuff. She thinks of checking out in the morning and Dean saying something like, Don't

worry about it. It's free. Just stop in next time, if you're ever driving this way again. She thinks about all this and she walks back toward the door. She holds the handle for moment, looking through the peephole to see if Dean is watching her room from his window, but all she sees are floating leaves in the water.

III: A Funeral And An Introduction

Jane and Stella met on the first day of kindergarten. Jane thought Stella's hair looked like pieces of silver yarn cut from the belly of the moon. Except for their hair, she thought, they looked like sisters. They were inseparable as kids. They spent time apart over the years, of course, but this would be the biggest absence. At this thought, Jane finds herself wondering once again where all the dead people go. Their souls, their essence, and is there an afterlife? The idea of Stella as a ghost makes her feel sad and empty and she shakes her head as if physically expelling the thought from her mind.

Jane lights the cigarette she's been twirling between her fingers and she watches the embers as they fall to the earth, an orange dust to dark. The insects at her feet are unfazed by the bits of ash that hover in the air before landing next to their tiny legs. She hears someone call her name.

"Jane?" a man's voice says again. "I've been sent to find you. They're almost ready for you."

She inhales. She takes her time as she breathes in the smoke and slowly raises her eyes from the ground. Before her is a tall, nicely built man, possibly her age or a little older. She only glances at his face momentarily before eyeing his belt, then lets her gaze drift down to his crotch. She's lost all subtlety, she thinks, all her composure and manners gone. She doesn't care. Sex is a good distraction. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other and clears his throat.

"Would you like me to help you up?" he says. A small laugh escapes her and she waves smoke from her face.

"No," she says.

"Okay," he says, but he doesn't leave.

His voice is soft but strong, like the deep drone of steady machinery. Everything feels metallic. Inorganic. She taps the end of her cigarette and looks him in the eye. He lingers for a moment, then sits down beside her. She looks away.

“I couldn’t take it in there,” she says. “I had to leave.” She can tell he’s watching her, waiting for her to say more but she doesn’t.

“I’m Peter,” he says after a moment. He stretches out his hand in an awkward, halfway pose to keep from thrusting his arm into her lap.

“Jane,” she says, facing him again. “But you seem to know that already.”

She doesn’t take his hand and after a few seconds he lets it drop. Jane focuses once again on the ants near her feet, swarming over bits of old crackers someone left behind. She holds her breath and then looks at Peter. He has a beautiful profile, the kind any artist would love to sculpt. She’s not a sculptor though so it won’t be her. On an impulse, she puts her hand on his cheek.

“It’s nice,” she says, then drops her hand. He turns toward her, slightly stunned. “You have a nice face.”

She pictures her own face: pale skin and dark eyes framed by the jagged, motel room haircut. People have been telling her she looks beautiful all day despite the crooked hair. Liars. Empty compliments, conversation fillers for people too afraid to say the obvious: she’s lost her mind with the loss of Stella. Peter swallows.

“Thank you,” he says.

“Would you like one?” She pulls the pack of cigarettes from her bag. There’s a black ‘X’ drawn through the warning label.

“No,” he says. “I don’t smoke.” But he stays with her until she finishes her cigarette and dabs it out. She tosses the mostly full box of cigarettes into a trash can, then the lighter.

Inside the church, the air is thick with the smell of flowers. There is no body displayed; Stella didn’t like coffins. Cremated. Jane tries breathing through her mouth but the heaviness remains. She is careful not to look at anyone as she walks toward the altar to deliver a eulogy for Stella. Several people have written tributes but Jane is the first in a line otherwise composed of relatives to read hers. She hesitates behind the podium for a moment before speaking. She seems to leave her body as she reads. She feels the sensation of her lips moving, a tingling in her throat

that lets her know she is actually talking, but she can't hear herself. Her eyes fix on the stained glass, reminding her of Stella's moon hair as the light through the window illuminates the room in a watery, silver shade of blue. The light makes everyone's hair look like Stella's.

People nod their heads toward Jane when she's finished speaking. She makes her way to a pew while Stella's brother walks to the podium. She stares at the floor until the service is over and everyone is heading to the fellowship hall for the reception. The sanctuary empties. She stares at the pulpit until everything begins to blur, then she, too, leaves. She buttons her sweater as she heads to the hall, toward the table decorated with colorful bouquets and photos of Stella. She spots a photo of them as children. In it, she and Stella are dressed in fancy clothes for their music recital. Stella is sticking her tongue out to the camera and Jane is laughing, looking at Stella. She feels the presence of someone approaching now and she turns to see Peter crossing the room toward the table. He has a glass of white wine in each hand and he offers one to Jane once he reaches her.

"I thought you might want this. Apologies if that's too forward," he says.

"Does it matter?" she says. She nods appreciatively as she takes the wine and clinks her glass against his. "Thank you."

"That's you, I take it?" he says, pointing to the photo of Jane and Stella.

"That's us," she says.

"And do you still play?" He smiles. She looks at the violin she's holding in the photo.

"I do," she says. "Professionally."

"Wow."

"Ha," she says. "I play in a few different wedding bands. But it's steady enough, so that's something. People are always getting married. Happily ever after, you know."

"I wish I had even a smidge of musical talent," he says, taking a sip of his wine and straightening his tie.

"I teach as well."

"Would you teach me?" he says. He laughs a bit.

She doesn't answer. Instead, she examines the crease between his brows, the faint crow's feet at the edge of his blue eyes. His coral tie is clashing with his yellow checked shirt poking out

from under his sky blue suit jacket. Stella's parents requested people wear anything but black today; at least Peter read the fine print. They are quiet together, watching guests come and go, give their condolences, grab a sandwich, a beer or glass of wine.

"Her mother was friends with my mom—is friends," Peter says. "Actually, they tried to set us up once."

"And?" Jane says. She swirls the wine in her glass.

"And it turned out she had a boyfriend."

"When was this?" she says. Her eye contact is undiluted, searching.

"Before I started law school," he says. He looks at his wine glass, then his shoes. "Almost two years ago."

"Jimmy. We liked Jimmy." Her face relaxes until her expression begins to look vacant, aloof. She tries tucking her short hair behind her ear but it won't stay. She finishes her glass of wine and sets it on the table, then picks it up again.

"I should go find Stella's mom," she says.

"Right," he says.

"Then I think I'll drive home, park my car, and walk to the bar at the end of the block. I think that's a solid plan."

"Oh. Yeah. It was nice talking with you," he says.

"You can join me," she says. Peter's eyes widen for a moment before he catches himself and relaxes the muscles in his face.

"I drove my mom here," he says.

"She doesn't drive?"

"She does," he says.

"Okay," she says. "So, meet me in the parking lot in ten minutes if you want to come. Tell your mother." He hesitates.

"All right," he says.

"Okay then. Maybe I'll see you."

She walks into the crowd toward Stella's family, leaving Peter by the flowers. When she exits the building, she finds him sitting on the steps facing the parking lot, and he stands to

follow her. She notes the birds flying overhead as she says a silent goodbye to her friend. Stella is not here. But she senses her somehow. Stella is everywhere now.

In the car, Peter fiddles with the seatbelt that doesn't want to buckle. Jane tells him it's busted and Peter says he thinks there might be something stuck in the buckle which is why it won't latch. She tells him she'll drive carefully, but somehow she seems to coast around fifteen or sometimes twenty miles per hour over the allotted thirty. He holds the handle above the door.

"Is your apartment far?" he asks.

"Twenty minutes," she says.

"Great."

When they reach her street, Jane skims the curb before parking in front of a rundown building with a dehydrated rosebush at the front steps. Peter straightens his tie once he's out of the car. Jane asks him if he'd like to come inside or if he'd prefer to meet her at the bar.

"It's just down there," she says, pointing to the end of the street.

"What would you prefer?" he asks her. Jane shrugs.

"I don't really care," she says.

Her dress billows at her calves in the evening breeze. It's a gauzy, pastel pink with puffed sleeves and a sash at the waist. She's left her sweater in the car, he's just realized, and she seems to be simultaneously cutting into him with her eyes and looking past him, or through him.

"Or just wait here if you like," she says.

And then she is turning and rummaging in her purse for her keys and walking up the steps. Peter trails after her. They are silent as they enter the building, as they climb the flight of stairs, and as they walk down the hall till they reach her apartment. Inside, there is a room filled with plants and a tawny leather sofa covered in cracks. There's no television that he can see. In the corner by the window is a small folding table and two mismatched chairs. On the table, a vase with tulips that no longer look alive. The kitchen is to the left of the front door, which is really just a countertop surrounded by a fridge, a sink, and an oven. At the windowsill above the sink are more plants.

"Have a seat," she motions to the couch. "I'm just going to change."

Peter sits on the sofa. He notices her violin across from him, mounted to the wall. And next to it is a doorway with no door that Jane walks through. He discerns that this must be her bedroom and he moves to the small table by the window so that he can give her privacy to change. She emerges a few minutes later still wearing her pink dress, but with flat, slip-on sandals instead of heels, and a denim jacket. She takes cash from her purse which she stuffs in her pocket and hangs her bag on a hook by the door.

They walk down the street to the bar. They find a table outside where they sip their beers. She asks him to tell her about himself so that she can stop thinking about Stella. Peter says they can talk about Stella, he'd like to listen. She ignores this offer and asks him what he plans to do after law school. She asks him if he lives with his parents, recalling how he drove his mother to Stella's funeral. No, he tells her, he's just in town for a visit. She asks him when his visit is over and he tells her soon, he's starting the fall semester next week. His university is far, on the opposite side of the country. She asks him if he ever plans to come back, you know, to live. He tells her he doesn't mind where he ends up as long as he can get a job that pays well.

"Because that's important to you?" she asks. Peter picks at the pretzels in the glass bowl on the table.

"Well, yeah," he says. Jane nods. "It's not the only thing that's important. That's not what I'm saying."

"You don't have to defend yourself," she says. "I don't mind if people like money. Maybe I should like it more."

They have a second beer and then Jane announces to Peter that she needs to go home before she has another drink. She wants to get drunk more than anything but her students have an important rehearsal tomorrow and she can't be hungover. She can't let them down.

"You'll have to get a taxi home though, I definitely shouldn't drive," she says, and they leave.

The street lamps light their way down the road. Peter's not sure if Jane finds him funny or if she's just making herself laugh, to humor him, or to make herself feel better. He doesn't mind though. It occurs to him that Jane's face is so lovely, it will be hard to shake her from his memory. It also occurs to him that he hopes this won't be the last time he sees her. At the bar, she

put her phone number into his phone and he can't stop thinking about it, how he has a small piece of her with him now. As they approach her building, he takes out his phone to get an Uber.

"You can come in," she says. "If you like."

Upstairs, she pours him a glass of water. She takes a frozen pizza from the freezer and sets it on the counter. Then she grabs Peter's hand and steers him to her bedroom. There's a curtain hanging at the edge of the doorframe that he didn't notice earlier and she pulls it across the doorway. When she turns around, Peter is watching her. She doesn't tell him to come closer, but he seems to infer that's what she wants. He steps toward her and rests his hand on the small of her back, and he leans down and presses his forehead against hers. She reaches up and touches his face and they stare at each other. She kisses him and he lets out a soft, unintentional hum. She plucks at the buttons on his shirt until it's open and then it's off and she stands back. He closes the gap between them and tugs gently at her jacket and then places it on the chair next to him. He touches the sash on her dress. Then all their clothes are off and they are under her floral printed covers, and there's a cool draft from the window left slightly ajar. Through it, there is the sound of people laughing and talking on the street below.

In the morning, Jane wakes up to Peter's alarm on his phone. He is still asleep, and she presses the button to snooze the beeping. She seems unbothered that Peter is still in her bed. She gets up and puts on a bathrobe and walks to the kitchen. She makes coffee and then she froths milk before pouring it into the mugs. She walks back to the bedroom and sits on the edge of the bed next to Peter. She runs her fingers through his hair, waking him up. It only takes a moment before recognition of where he is registers on his face and he sits up, taking the coffee Jane offers him. He smiles at her and she stands to conceal how her cheeks are blushing. She opens the curtains and lets the sunlight wash across the room.

IV: An Injury

Jane is sitting on the kitchen floor with a crocheted blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She reaches for the empty shoebox behind her labeled 'Peter' and drops into it an antique, sapphire ring with a band made of yellow gold. She closes the lid and puts the box on the table. She looks down at her feet and she grabs the nail polish sitting next to her on the floor,

and she thinks about painting her nails. She opens it, and maroon dots the floor as she holds the brush in her hand above the tile. She wipes up the mess with her blanket before it can dry and sets the polish down. Everything is turning a faded version of itself, ashen and dull, as the afternoon becomes dusk.

She gets up to flip on the light switch. It flickers and then the bulb burns out. She moves like her limbs are made of stone, each step slow and heavy as she makes her way to the cabinet where the lightbulbs are stored. She pulls the blanket tight around her shoulders and grabs the box of bulbs but drops it at the sound of the front door being unlocked. Peter. She watches the bulbs bounce from their box, each one shattering as they hit the ground.

“Shit,” she says. She bends down and begins collecting the broken parts. “Shit,” she says again, this time as the razor edge of the thin glass slices her hand.

Peter shuts the door behind him and turns on the light in the hallway. She can tell he’s trying to be quiet. He sees her from the hallway as she shuffles in the kitchen and he walks in her direction. He spots the glass on the floor.

“What happened?” he says.

“The light burned out.”

She points to the light above them and blood drips onto the floor. He cringes at the sight of blood pooling in her hand. Peter turns on the dim light over the stove so he can see her better, then he kneels down to help her up. Her hand stains his shirt.

“Sorry,” she says.

“It’s just a shirt,” he says. He walks her over to the sink and holds her hand under the faucet.

“That stings,” she says. She flinches as he washes the cut with soap, inspecting it to make sure there is no glass stuck in her skin.

“I thought you might be sleeping,” he says. “You didn’t answer my call.”

“Not asleep,” she says. “Anyway, I have work soon.” She notices how the blood stays under her nails, even under the warm water. “That hurts, Peter. Stop.”

“Sorry,” he says.

He dries his hands and leaves the room to get a bandage. Jane watches him walk down the hall and hears him go into the bathroom. As he comes back into the kitchen, he spots the shoebox on the table with his name written on it. The box filled with letters he wrote to her in his last year of law school, jewelry he's given her.

"For me?" he says.

He picks up the box and glances at its contents, confused. Jane eyes the box of bandages in his hand.

"I thought you might want it back," she says finally. He looks at her now and sets the box down.

"Back?" he says.

"Yes, back," she says. "Because I'm leaving."

He reaches for the box of bandages, struggling to open it. When he finally has a bandage unwrapped, he approaches Jane and she lets him pat her hand dry with a paper towel. He tries to stick the bandage on her palm but it must still be damp because it won't stay. He walks back to the table and tears off another bandage at its pre-perforated line.

"Did you hear me?" she says. "Peter."

"You thought I might want this shoebox because you're leaving," he says. "Make sure your hand is dry this time. Do we have antiseptic cream?"

"Peter," she says. Peter sets the unwrapped bandage on the kitchen table.

"What is it?" he says. "Do I not make enough money for you? We don't do enough? Am I too boring?"

"You know that's not it," she says. "I just—"

"Just what?" Blood has started seeping through the paper towel she's holding against her cut. It's deeper than she thought.

"I just need to be alone for awhile."

"And then what?" he says. "You'll come back after a couple weeks and ask me to forgive you? We've done this before."

"I know," she says.

“I can’t keep waiting for you,” he says. “I’m not going to wait for you. You promised this time would be different.”

“I know, Peter.”

“Why do you need to be alone?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I’m not ready to get married.”

“We don’t have to get married.”

“Peter, you want to be married. You’ve told me this so many times.”

“Right, well.”

“Well?”

“Well, I won’t hold you hostage.”

“Peter.” His voice sounds like she might cry.

“What?” he says. “I can’t comfort you right now. I can’t comfort you while you leave me.”

“That’s not fair,” she says. She presses a fresh paper towel against the cut and tosses the dirty one in the sink.

“Not fair? Not fair is deciding to leave with no warning, no discussion.”

“No,” she says. “Not fair is you asking me to marry you in front of an entire table of guests where the only thing I could say was yes.”

“No one made you say yes,” he says. He runs his hands through his hair, then he loosens his tie.

“Really? Isn’t that exactly why you asked me in front of everyone? Because you knew I wouldn’t say no to you at your birthday party?”

“I thought you were happy.”

“I was happy. We were happy. I don’t know why we need marriage to prove that.”

“Fine, we don’t,” he says.

“I don’t believe you, Peter. And it’s more than that,” she says. “I thought we were on the same page.”

“We are,” he says.

“We aren’t. You want us to buy a house.”

“And would you rather have a boat?” She blows a stray piece of hair from her face.

“No, I don’t want a boat, Peter. I can’t afford to buy a house, you know that.”

“I can buy us a house. I don’t care if I pay for more. I’d pay for everything if you let me, I don’t understand why that bothers you.”

“How can you not understand?” she says. “I don’t want to lose my independence, to be completely reliant on you.”

“Guess what? When you choose to merge your life with someone, you lose a little independence. Everyone does and that’s normal. It doesn’t mean you have some major codependency issue.”

“I don’t like feeling like I’m losing myself, like I have to prove myself to your family,” she says.

“What does my family have to with you and I?” he says.

“Everything, Peter. The last time we were at your parents’ house, your mom asked me if I’ve considered freezing my eggs.”

“She’s been telling my sister to freeze hers since she was twenty. That’s just how she talks to people.”

“It’s the implication that I’m never going to give you what you want.”

“I know what I want,” he says. “And it doesn’t have anything to do with you freezing your eggs or other shit my mom says. We can wait to buy house. We don’t have to get married.”

“But I want you to have those things, Peter. I don’t want to hold you back or stand in the way of what you want,” she says.

“Please stop saying ‘what I want.’”

“Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me you’d be okay with never getting married, maybe not having kids?” Peter is silent. He stares at the table, at his shoes.

“It’s for the best,” she says. “For you. You’ll see.”

They’re quiet for a long time. Eventually, Peter leaves the kitchen and emerges after awhile with a suitcase rolling behind him.

“Where are you going?” she says. Her tone is hushed.

“I don’t know,” he says. “My parents’ house, I guess.”

“Peter, I’ll go. You stay.”

“No,” he says. “Not this time. This time, I get to leave.”

She doesn’t argue. She stares at the stained paper towel. Peter pauses for a moment, his eyes tracing Jane’s shadowed silhouette by the sink. Then he walks outside and she listens as he walks down the stairs, opens and then shuts the door to his car, and drives away. After she is sure he is gone, Jane picks up the box of bandages and wraps up her hand. She opens the shoebox and empties it onto the table and picks up the antique ring with the dark, sapphire stone. She puts it on and once again wonders how Peter found her the most beautiful ring, how he knew. When she wakes in the morning, the ring is still on her finger.

V: A Drive

A man is driving down a city road as the sun is beginning to set. It’s the end of summer. A woman sits in the seat beside him. The windows are down and the woman’s hair blows across her face. A neon diner sign shines and its colors mix with the sun’s gamboge glow as it slips below the horizon. Two used car lots are perched adjacent to one another at an intersection. Then they are passing a wide, city park that is lush with tall trees. On the opposite side of the street, squared brick duplexes begin to replace the row of restaurants and businesses.

He asks her if she would like to pick out something to listen to after they sit in silence together for a few more blocks. He has a large, ancient CD case on the floor by her feet and she reaches for it now, unzips it. She flicks through each sleeve until one artist makes her stop. She reads the name out loud and he asks her if she likes the band, and she replies that she only knows the one song he sent her in an email several months ago. She plucks the album from the CD case and inserts it into the stereo. He skips each track until he gets to the song. She doesn’t say she listened to it on repeat for weeks after he sent it to her, she is sure he knows this. He has to. He blasts the volume and the warm breeze grows heavier as he accelerates. They look at each other for a second before he turns his attention back to the road, and they almost laugh but they don’t. They look away, listening.