

GRAVITY

The closet looms like an old-fashioned armory. You run your hand over the cloth, which is so soft you feel sick. A moment of darkness overtakes and roots you to the ground, the negative 9.8 meters per second squared holding you there for eternity in a moment. But it passes, and sartorial choices flood every sense. It's Wednesday, which means James and Susan might hop over to In Another Life, that bar on 6th Street they love, so you need to dress accordingly.

Summer dress with the thick leather belt buckled right above the stomach to downplay the belly and accentuate the breasts? Maybe, but it'd be the third time in seven days.

Your version of skinny jeans — tight enough to hold jiggling thighs in place — with the short-sleeved black hoodie that makes you look like a shadow? Maybe, but you're tired of hiding. Plus, this Texas heat.

The give-up, who-cares pantsuit of a hungry professional that hides anything you actually care about? Looking better, no doubt.

The deep V-neck black velvet camisole with the white polka-dot skirt? If you felt just a bit better. Maybe with Spanx, it'd be OK. If you felt just a bit better ...

You can't do this.

After a shower, the bathroom mirror speaks to you through the painfully stereotypical heart vaguely drawn in its foggy surface, the very same one left so many months ago. You trace it with a finger and give it life for one more day.

You decide you do feel good.

On the way to work, you position the seatbelt between your breasts, even though no one but you can see them.

You don't know why.

"About time," James chides as you walk in.

"Oh, good, Katie," Susan looks up over what must be a third cup of coffee. "I've got a galley that I need back by COB. They found like 3,000, or a few thousand or whatever, dead fish, mostly carp but some alewhites and gar or something, in a river in Tennessee. Anyway, they are claiming it's some sort of disease that's never been seen before or something, and humans might be susceptible or something. I need you to check it with that eagle eye of yours, and maybe put in some calls to learn a bit more, because as you probably picked up on, there's a lot of 'or somethings' going on here."

"Can't you just call me Katherine?"

"Oh, you're so cute, honey."

You sigh.

"Sure, I'll get it for you. How many inches are you looking at?"

"Gaynor wants to package it. So I'm guessing about thirty-five to forty."

"Wow, really? OK, let me go make some tea, and I'll get right on it," you turn, then turn back. "Wait ... was it near Memphis? My younger sister was there for a regatta this weekend."

"Huh? Oh honey, yeah, but they're saying that no one's come in contact with it or anything. She's fine, I'm sure. I didn't even know she rowed crew."

"Yeah. At Tulane."

"I'm sure she's fine, honey. You worry too much."

"Oh, OK. I'll call her," you turn away and feel the elastic band of your panties bunch slightly at the waistline and curl over itself as your body shifts, which acts like a Bouncy Betty, nearly forcing an explosion of tears in your soft gut, but it pushes aside any worries about your sister. You shake your head, think maybe a little more sleep might be in order tonight, make your tea and begin underlining facts in the galley that need to be checked.

And thus is your day until lunch. Phone calls made, websites looked up. Production, production, production. A gnawing in your stomach from filling it with tea, honey in the first cup but not in the subsequent four.

"Katie ..."

"Katherine."

"Whatever, honey, you coming to lunch with us?"

"Please do," James chimes in. "I think Sean's coming."

"So?"

"Don't be thick, honey. Just come."

You wince at her seemingly purposeful word choice.

"OK. I just have to put in one more call to UT. Where? I'll meet you there."

"I don't care what you guys say, I want Stubb's today."

"Oh, today? But isn't Neil Young playing there tonight? I don't feel like seeing the line outside," you say.

"Anyway, Stubb's sucks."

"I want Stubbs, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"OK," you say. "I'll meet you there."

The stoplight presents a new mystery, but the logic in its arrangements soothes you and even though you can't always discern red from green, you stop because red is on top and green is on bottom. You chuckle as you wait. In college, you thought becoming the first colorblind artist glowed with brilliance, but after a failed Christmas show — oh, you were clever — you slumped back to the dorm, filling up your oversized purse with Frosty-imprinted sugar cookies the RA had set out and sat in your room, even eating the ones that tasted salty from the tears smeared on your fingers as incomprehensible to you as the colors that brought you there.

You arrive last to Stubb's, and the three of them — Susan, James and Sean — standing at the front desk, studying the *Stubb's BBQ Cold Beer • Live Music* t-shirts when James announces he's buying all of you one.

“We've lived in Austin how long?” he says. “And none of us have a Stubb's shirt. Every time a friend comes in, they buy a Stubb's or an Emo's shirt, and we don't have any. Well, I'm fixing that!”

When he asks your size, you glance at Sean, who just smiles warmly, then you pretend to be studying the SXSW poster still on the wall even though the festival ended two weeks ago and begin fiddling with the Band-Aids on the back of your heels, covering bloody blisters.

“Katie, what size you think?”

Realizing you're backed into this corner, everything freezes in midair and starts fading to black, but before you disappear completely you manage to choke out the word “large,” which sends James into a fit of laughter as he exclaims that's far too big for you. So you tell him you want to sleep in it (which isn't far off — you don't exactly need a

shirt announcing the joy of Bar-B-Que) and nearly sprint to the restroom, trying to count the wooden columns on the way, anything to remove yourself from this moment.

Returned to the thick wooden counter, you scan the blackboard menu with the tenacity of a minesweeper. Sean pushes a thicket of reddish brown hair out of his face and turns to you with kind eyes.

“Have you been here?”

“Only for a show, never to eat.”

“Oh, who’d you see?”

“Bob Dylan, but his arthritis seemed to be especially bad that day. He could barely even play piano.”

“Oh, that sucks. I saw him when I was still living in Chicago, but it was in winter and he seemed to be hurting pretty bad. But hey, at, what, 71, you can’t complain that much.”

“He’s 69.”

“Oh yeah, whatever. Anyway, go with the pulled pork. Trust me on this. It’s fantastic.”

You know it contains a pike bomb, but you want to listen to Sean. You want him to know you want to listen to him, and you're not sure how to do that, so you order the pulled pork with a sheepish whisper, blocking out everything as you reach for the wallet in your oversized purse. Thus you don’t see Sean as he reaches forward to pay for your meal, bumping into you, skin on skin.

“Sorry,” he says.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Well, it’s my suggestion, so let me cover this.”

“No.”

Quickly pay. Quickly walk to table. Red-faced, you can hear Susan and James tell Sean not to worry, that you're still new to “the game” since Kevin left, and you think of the heart on my bathroom mirror, the one only you know of, and you strain to climb up the cavern you are falling into, but the rock walls are slippery with algae, like they always are, and you drop into the water and sadly, helplessly, emptily watch the light dissipate slowly at your outstretched fingertips as you sink to the murky bottom.

Sean reaches the table first, surfacing you.

“Hey, Katherine, I’m sorry for back there. I was totally out of line.”

“No, no. I, uh, I was just off guard is all.”

“You don’t need to be *on* guard.”

James and Susan plop down red baskets of food their bodies will process, break down, destroy without a trace.

“So *Statesman* closes or Stubb’s closes. Which could you handle more?” Susan asks James.

“Oh, *Statesman*, easy. Who needs a job?”

“But then we might all have to move to Dallas,” Sean points out. “Or Houston. And I can’t, I repeat, *can’t* cover the Rangers or the Astros.”

“Probably better than covering the Longhorns!”

“I don’t know, man. Something about watching those guys rise up and go to the show ... it’s kind of a great feeling. Like you helped them along.”

“Go to the show’? Look at this guy.”

“By writing about what they do wrong?” Susan laughs. “I guess someone needs to do it.”

“I have to go out there tomorrow, actually. New pitcher.”

“Oh wow,” you speak up. “Supposed to be about 107 degrees.”

Everyone groans, and you delicately take a bite of your sandwich.

“Yet another day where I wonder why clothes are necessary,” Sean clumsily winks at you as he says this stilted line, and you chuckle before seeing how much of the sandwich you've eaten. You excuse yourself to the bathroom.

The rest of the meal passes without incident, just a kaleidoscope of shadows, until you leave.

When the doors open and the sunlight floods in, dread tries to seep through your pores, but they're clogged from the pulled pork — why didn't you just eat a salad like you're supposed to — and the line of people waiting for Neil Young and staring at your jellied form as it sloshes on solid ground toward the cars takes center stage in your mind's eye. You don't even notice James and Susan walking away.

Sean smiles at you, and in his smile, for a second, you find true caring, some sort of depth, something human. But not wanting to mistake pity for a crush, you wait until he pulls his Ray Bans on, then look firmly the other way, first at the line, then at the stage Neil Young will adorn. It occurs to you you're probably being silly, that Sean likes you, that maybe sometimes he actually thinks of you as he's falling asleep and ... doing other things ... that he yearns to press his lips against your neck while whispering how badly he wants you. The chill this thought sends racing down your spine is quickly replaced when you notice how rubbery your neck feels in this Texas heat, the way the sweat must ooze from between rolls, even if you can't really see them, the same way the fatty ends of the pork is oozing from your pores, and even if Sean thinks you're beautiful, you can't see what difference that really makes at this point.

He smiles one last time and tells you goodbye, in close for a hug. He pulls you tight, until your waists are touching, and he half-whispers “Really hope to see you again soon, Katie” and pulls away slowly, and you can almost feel him.

You reach your car, cell phone in hand. You're going to do this. You're going to just call Sean and ask him to dinner. It's not exactly the hardest thing in the world. The phone is ringing next to your ear as you stare at flowers in the bed dividing the sides of the parking lot.

When his voicemail message begins, the flowers melt into the ground, waxen statuettes burned by the sun, and your throat is dry and scratchy like a Brillo Pad. You shove a chubby finger on the END button. And you just sink down, right there, right in the middle of the goddamn parking lot, the gravity becoming too much to shoulder, the gravity giving your mass weight, the gravity of your brain and all that you know sinking down until it almost touches your knees. And you want to cry. And you want to just weep like a baby. And you want to shake and shiver and shout and scream but instead you do nothing but stare at the specks in the concrete and you are thirty-five and you thought life would be so much better by now. You are smart. You are successful. You are covered in stretch marks and salutations and savage salutations and the spatial distancing of your dreams and desires is as empty as your days. But then you stand up, because you have to, and you get in your car, because you have to, and you speed back to work, because you have to, your large Stubb's t-shirt that almost seems two sizes too big, somehow, slung lazily over the headrest of the leather passenger seat. The road flies by in flashes, the hospitals and prisons and project houses and graffiti laden skeletons of broken homes blur away, and when you reach the newsroom, you realize you wasn't ever aware that you was driving.

As you walk in the room and look around at the bustling typing and excited legs shaking under desks, the next big scoop looming large and beautiful, the dead fish story filling everyone with happiness, you realize your sadness is as uninteresting and indecipherable to them as red and green are to you.

And that's OK.

There's a page on your desk, waiting to be checked for facts, and the graphic head reads "*The Wire Comes to Austin*" over a photo of three black youths, laid out on pavement, blood clearly puddling around their wasted bodies. None of them are more than 17 years old, the same age you were when you finally first tried to kiss a guy.

"Hilarious James."

"Oh don't shake your head like that. Why are you so Debbie downer today?"

"Debbie downer? Really?"

"Well, come on. It's funny."

"It's not that funny," you say, as your eyes scan the story about the three boys who were engaged in some small-time gang battle over who would sell cheaply cut heroine at a corner the Rundberg/IH35 area. You can't help but wonder why the two boys didn't just move down one block.

Making more tea when Susan attacks you.

"What the hell was that, at lunch, Katie?"

"What the hell was what?"

"You know what. Sean wanted to pay, and I know you're into him. Don't think I don't notice how many buttons you have done up when you see the boy."

"Don't call me Katie."

“So that’s all you’re gonna say? Kevin’s gone. Honey, you don’t mean to pry, but Sean is so cute ...”

“This isn’t appropriate at work, Susan.”

She grunts.

“Honestly, you need to just let go,” but the phone rings so you don’t have to respond.

You grab the receiver, hoping for good news. A marine biologist at UT’s lab and an environmental lawyer working at Vanderbilt are in on the conference call. It turns out the story is true — approximately 2,700 fish were found, unexplainable dead, oddly after having laid six times the amount of eggs they normally lay. The lawyer says there’s no one to place blame on, since it doesn’t, at first look, appear to have anything to do with environmental issues. The marine biologist is concerned about the lack of information and doesn’t think this is really at a stage where it should be released, since it could cause mass panic. For all they know, it was a one-time event.

But deadline is in an hour.

So the story prints.

Produce, produce, produce.

Wash out your tea mug, scrape honey off the sides. Arrange papers on your desk. Check the editorial calendar. Ask the design team if they need anything for graphics before you leave. Make a joke about bylines. Look around this wonderful place you work, this place you always dreamed of working, and cringe at the thought of tomorrow.

In the parking lot, walking toward the car.

“Katie!” Sean is breathless. “You didn’t answer my calls all day. I was trying to get back to you. What’s up?”

“Uhh ... it's Kather ... I just wanted to, uhh, apologize again or, yeah. And, if you ever need, you know, a pitcher's stats checked or ...”

“A drink? Can we cut the crap?”

You chuckle.

“Who couldn't use a drink? I gotta go.”

You walk to the car, and then, a moment of strength, yell “Tomorrow!” but don't know if he hears.

As you're driving home, your blasé countenance staring at churches placed like tourniquets at the edge of the low-income neighborhoods, you notice a boy. Cute but flawed — His pectorals are a little too rounded and his hips are a little too flared and while no one would mistake him for a woman, the joke could be made, surely *has* been made hundreds of times in his youth, which probably accounts for the overly toned arms and the faint beard. Shimmering eyes flicker up, catch yours, flash back down, all in a second — which is how long it took for the atom to splice in Little Boy, you think for no apparent reason — and you know everything there is to know about him, but the consequences are naught for here you go, caught again in the deadening pull of gravity. And you're back down the hill, a beggar sitting with a sign that reads “Need Money 4 Beer” and a smile.

But soon he is gone too, just the rustling of the wind through a vivacious city whose life is lost on you, pulled down by gravity into the caverns of you past, of who you are, of who you were, of who you will always be, that fat fucking worthless cow of a person whose only salient feature was her breasts and, somehow, still is. You momentarily feel like you've lost control of your body, forgetting how a car works, a

moment of abject panic so apparent and clear, your entire gossamer being begins tearing from the inside.

Your scars burn. The sideways stoplight, the one that always threw you off, watches as you pull up, and you feel its eye — which you now know to be red — glaring at you angrily, judging, seeing your scars that match its iris, and your mind is like the HypoGravity down at Venice Beach, but you can't get off.

The same HypoGravity centrifuge carnival ride machinery that malfunctioned yesterday and dropped two children to the ground like they would have dropped cherry bombs into a mailbox but never can now because the ground did not move while they continued to. And you feel cherry bombs being dropped into your insides, destroying the three Hershey's Kisses and the fizzing Diet Coke you shouldn't have had — it slows the metabolism — and as they explode, you wretch over, slip a greasy hand under your shirt and feel the tiny loose ripples of the stretch marks there and you know under them is your uterus and you wonder if it will ever be filled, if anyone will ever be able to look past what covers it, and you don't even realize the car is glowing green because you've looked down. The color blurs like the world begins to as you slam a clumsy foot down on the pedal and speed home, a couple of tears wasted on the Kelly Clarkson song that's playing — how can she be so crass? Doesn't she realize what she has? — about some pretty Hollywood boy not loving her enough. And you know she doesn't understand it isn't about *enough*, it's about being loved *at all*.

And when you get home, you throw open the fridge, shaking, on edge now, but you're smart and you've strategized and between the skim milk and the fat-free turkey is nothing but the glowing yellow light shining bright as an interrogator's bulb, and you feel your stomach drop but not because of gravity. You look up at an empty apartment and,

for some reason, you feel OK for a second, like if all this furniture is tangible and here and hasn't moved that maybe, just maybe, hope exists. It just waits at the end of a hot shower.

You consider masturbating, the thoughts of Sean finally making you smile, and you trace a hand down your soft belly, a tingling following your chewed-nails. As you slip off your top and bra, delicately rubbing a nipple with a licked finger, you noticed the answering machine blinking red.

"Katherine, this is Mike Gaynor at the *Statesman*. I'm here with James. We want you to head to Tennessee, take a real look at this thing. We want you reporting, not fact-checking. I wish you had come to see me today. We need you to leave pretty early in the morning for meet-and-greet we've set up at UT. They'll take you to the river. If that doesn't work, please call me immediately, and we'll assign a different reporter. You can borrow a car from the newsroom or use a personal one, and we'll reimburse you for mileage and gas."

Surprised and suddenly slightly shaking, you stand topless in the living room, no longer feeling sexy. You remember your sister, who might have, from the sounds of it, been exposed to some sort of disease (though you think she might have been sick for the race, but for some reason you don't call her to find out). Still, it's a shot at reporting. And not just reporting, but doing it remote (you realize this is because they don't think it's a huge story and don't want to waste a "real" reporter, but it feels good regardless).

So you strip off the rest of your clothes in the bathroom and stare into the mirror again, this time trying to ignore the ghosts of scars covering you and instead focus on the way your forearm muscles twitch when you flick your fingers and the pinpoint of your elbow and the defined V between your legs — these things did not exist two years ago —

and you smile, but as you climb into the shower and turn on the water, at the last second before the liquid closes your eyes and soothes your body, you notice something you've never noticed before even though you've surely seen hundreds of times: the small but simple twenty degree curve of skin where your abdomen meets the buttocks, and you know it doesn't matter and no one would care but you are alone and sometimes blindness exists in the light as well as the darkness and you know the inevitability of gravity pulling it down even further, toward the ground, no matter how hard you try, and acceptance may be a virtue, but you slap the wall with a hand, feeling one of your new nails crack on the tile. You slump down, the water hitting the top of your head, matting your hair to your face in horrid clumps where you missed with the comb when distracted this morning, and you pull at it, trembling, and you watch the dyed-black hair swirl into the drain like leeches in a muddy whirlpool, sucked down by gravity, clogging it until you clean it yet again.

THE END