

Bugs Under a Spaghetti Strainer

My name is Olivia “Liv” Mansour. I am twenty-six years old. The first thing I remembered on my own a couple hours after I woke up from surgery. The second was explained to me by my psychologist a few minutes later when I confidently informed him that it’s 2012.

My neurologist told me I was knocked out by a half-full paint can. My psychologist asked me how that fact made me feel. They are not a good duo. They disagree about everything, and my psychologist doesn’t seem to know what he’s doing. The only non-hospital person I’ve been able to see since I arrived two weeks ago is my best friend, Baxter. According to my psychologist, everyone else who was close to me when I got hurt has either aged in a way that would alarm me, or I simply don’t know them anymore. Baxter was flattered by his perceived agelessness, and I bet my mom loved having some dork who just got out of grad school tell her that she’s aged too wickedly in the last five years to see her amnesiac daughter. Mercifully, she only screamed at me over the phone about it for twenty minutes. I don’t even ask where the psychologist got the data needed to decide who has aged too much for my fragile, traumatized brain.

Subdural hematoma. Traumatic brain injury. Craniotomy. Aphasia. Retrograde amnesia. I’m an expert on what happened to me, what it did. My psychologist informed me that, while traumatic brain injuries are unpredictable, I’m doing very well considering the extent of damage my little noggin sustained. Apparently memory loss is a blessing in disguise—wait, that’s not how that goes. What I mean is, apparently memory loss is *small change* compared to loss of motor control. I’m still getting the hang of idioms.

But I still don't know what happens when I leave here. Where is home? I'm guessing (hoping) I no longer live in the studio above the concessions wholesale place. I'm kind of worried that I don't live in the same city anymore, but I'm not sure. I'm in a hospital I've never been to, but I was transferred here while I was conked out to be treated by specialists (apparently Dr. Dork, Ph.D., was top of the class he graduated from last year). Transferred from where? I don't know, and I'm not asking. I just want to be cleared so I can go home, wherever that is.

I've exceeded all medical benchmarks these last few days and all I have to do before I can go, according to Dr. Dork, is look in a mirror. He hasn't let me until now, an idea both my neurologist and I don't agree with. But the kid is so well-meaning, and I really don't want to have some kind of outburst and be stuck here for another week.

So I'm standing in front of this covered mirror in a handicapped bathroom, because that's the only one with enough space for my two doctors and me. Dr. Dork, a gangly white boy in a lab coat that I'm sure he's tripped over at least twice this week, is waiting for my go-ahead to remove the sheet. My neurologist, a scruffy forty-year-old in a golf cap who looks like he was drunk until noon today, sits firmly on the toilet seat and slowly shakes his head.

I give Dr. Dork a nod and he dramatically removes the sheet (and smacks himself in the face with it). I look pretty much the same and I cannot describe my relief. My hair is shorter than I remember, which hopefully means I actually have time to keep up with it, and it doesn't look like I cut it myself, which hopefully means I can afford to get it cut by a professional. The bit of hair that was shaved before surgery (which has grown back quite a bit already) is not visible in the mirror. I'm wearing the clothes they told me I was originally admitted in: an aged blue

novelty t-shirt that says *I Love Motorboatin' in Kennebec Valley*, a green flannel, and a pair of jeans. I definitely don't remember any of these items and they reek of coconuts and dog. What I can say about the aged me is that I have never looked gayer.

I glance at Dr. Dork, who's only shifted his weight approximately twenty-seven times in the last thirty seconds.

"Wh-who's that?" I say, shakily pointing at the mirror.

Dr. Dork turns white. "What?"

"I don't recognize that person!"

Dr. Dork shrinks against the wall and the neurologist nearly falls off the toilet laughing. I haven't seen him laugh or even crack a smile before now. He stands and slaps me on the back. I notice *Dr. Brown* is stitched into his lab coat. How lucky, because I forgot his name as soon as he introduced himself (not because I have brain damage but because I'm awful). Dr. Dork can stay Dr. Dork.

"You can go," Dr. Brown says. "I'll call your family."

It's three p.m. by the time they arrive. Baxter and a woman I don't recognize.

"I'm your wife, Mia," the woman says gently.

My heart quickens. A bead of sweat breaks over my upper lip and my stomach contracts like a hand into a fist. I feel the way I did about six hours after I convinced Baxter that we should get dinner from a food truck that conveniently disappeared that very night. Everyone in the room takes a step back. I guess they can see how I feel and don't want to get puke on their shoes.

“Oh, my,” says Dr. Dork, stepping between Mia and me. “Did you forget you were gay?”

I can’t decide if I want to ask him if he’s never seen me or if he’s never seen a lesbian in general, so I settle for the pained cringe that Baxter, Mia, and even Dr. Brown are already wearing.

“No, she just forgot she had a wife,” Mia says, elbowing Dr. Dork out of her way. She’s miffed, as I can imagine anyone would be, but I can’t tell if it’s because of the born-yesterday psychologist or me.

I don’t see why I loved her before, or how anyone could. She’s 5’9” at the least and could probably grab her ankles without having to lean down. Her inhumanly long limbs can only be topped by her translucent, freckled skin and bright red hair. This is a woman who burns in the shade and thinks black pepper is spicy. Actually, scratch that last part. My mom would say it’s insulting to light-skin Indian and Lebanese people.

“We’ve been speaking steadily with Mia since your injury,” says Dr. Brown. “We are confident she can take over your care from here.”

“If that’s what you want,” Mia cuts in.

“Of course,” I say, knowing damn well I’d follow any kind stranger out of this place to escape hospital food and scratchy blankets.

To my relief, I’m still living in the same city, a tiny coastal village wedged between the Carolinas. It’s always bloated with tourists and everything smells like funnel cake, but it is mine and I know where everything is. I know which seafood buffets are worth it and which ones will

leave you locked in a bathroom for thirty-six hours. I know which business owners will let you walk in in your bathing suit just to let your kid take a piss and which ones will chase you out with a broom and stick a Polaroid of your blurred face to the back wall to make sure everyone knows you're never welcome in again.

After an hour-long ride, we are home. Apparently home is a quaint yellow bungalow on stilts that's only separated from the ocean by the Strip. I've never lived this close to the water, and I feel a twang of jealousy as if this isn't my own life I'm envying.

Upon entering the house I am greeted by a dog. He's a fluffy monstrosity, black with once-white boots stained red-brown, dirty drool dripping out of his permanent grin.

"Van got caught digging in the yard right before we left the house," Mia explains. "I didn't have time to clean him up."

"Van?" I try to act like I'm asking about his unique name to be polite and not because I'm dying of excitement to see that I've finally fulfilled the lesbian duty of having a dog.

"Short for Vincent van Gogh Fetch," Baxter says, grinning at the absurdity. "Your wife is a painter."

"So what do you want to eat for your big dinner tomorrow night?" Baxter asks.

It's been two hours since we got back. I've been rolling around on the floor with Van because I only have one life and there's no need to impress Mia because I already tricked her into marrying me somewhere along the line.

“Big dinner?” Opening my mouth to speak gives Van the opportunity to French kiss me, and I have to pretend it’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever experienced.

While I’m making a scene of spitting into the trashcan, Baxter explains that he and Mia have invited all of my closest friends and family to the house tomorrow to celebrate my surviving a traumatic brain injury, and Mia seems shocked that he hasn’t already told me.

“You’ve seen her several times, Baxter. Why didn’t you tell her?”

Baxter gives me his signature *Uh-oh, we’ve upset Mom* look that he uses around any upset adult, including (you guessed it) his own mom. “We had more important things to talk about. Right, Liv?”

But Mia isn’t laughing. She’s near tears with both of her lips sucked into her mouth. “You explicitly *told* me she said she was fine with it.”

“Oh my god, Mia.” Baxter’s voice is still taunting but I can tell he’s starting to feel bad. “I told you she was fine with it because I knew she would be.”

Mia turns her seconds-from-falling-apart gaze onto me and I can feel myself shrinking. This woman has got lasers hidden behind her eyes, I know it. To tell you the truth, the idea of facing everyone I know, even the people I remember, frightens me to the point of nausea, but I don’t want to be annihilated by the lasers, so I quickly nod my head.

“Okay,” Baxter says, clapping his hands and rubbing them together, his usual *Aaaaand we’re back* move. “So, what do you want? Pasta? Soup? Wings? Roast? Fish? *Zzz? Zzz? Zzz? Zzz?*” He’s talking to me through a foot of water and I can’t understand him. His words are just *zaps* from a Hasbro *Operation* board.

“You have to slow down,” Mia scolds as the room goes sideways. “She has aphasia.”

“Oh my god. She sees colorful letters and shit?” He’s serious.

“No, Baxter.”

He looks at me. “Oh shit, can you taste sounds?”

I try to stand. “I gotta.... I gotta...” *I gotta vomit.* “Bathroom?”

The high of leaving the hospital has subsided and now I feel like I’m suspended in jello. I’m standing in Mia’s bath—*my* bathroom. White linoleum squares with little blue linoleum square accents. Yellow tile in the shower. A mirror that you press and pop open and there’s a medicine cabinet behind it. This is a design one would call vintage to prevent other people from calling it ugly.

I open the window and am enveloped by the nostalgic scents of spring. New growth and freshly disturbed dirt. The bathroom smells dangerously clean, but not like bleach or any inorganic cleaning supplies. It smells like lemons and lemon—*shit*. I mean lemons and *linen*. The scent of a children’s hand soap (watermelon?) bounces off the porcelain sink alongside the harsh fluorescent light, reflecting and refracting and slapping me in the face.

I’ve been in here for at least twenty minutes and, after checking on me once, Baxter and Mia have already forgotten about me. I can hear them scream-laughing down the hall. I want to believe that Mia must be great because Baxter gets along with her, but the idea that Baxter is cautious and selective in choosing who to sit back and be profane with doesn’t hold water. Did I use that idiom right? Nevermind, it doesn’t matter.

The wind blows hard, pushing cherry blossoms through the window like a mother hurrying her tiny children into the house and away from the oppressive coastal sun. Another gust forces in the smell of the ocean.

I am here. I am here. I am here. No matter where my mind floats, I am here. It is spring. I live by the sea. I have a dog.

I hear Baxter and Mia are back to bickering.

“This backsplash is fucking ugly,” he complains. “A lighter color would be better. This burnt orange you got going on interrupts your back-home atmosphere.”

“I’m sorry,” Mia begins, sounding utterly considerate until she continues. “Do you eat my pussy or pay my bills?”

Baxter erupts into laughter again. Christ, she *is* my wife.

I wake up with a start, not remembering where I am or who owns the ass that’s backed into my crotch. But then the fynapses start siring—*ugh*. The *synapses* start *firing* and I’m back. I am in Mia’s bed—*my* bed—*our* bedroom, where I went to lie down after becoming overwhelmed. On the other side of Mia is the dog, expertly positioned as the littlest spoon. I use all my sleepy strength to lift my arm and check the watch I fell asleep in. Ten a.m.

Mia doesn’t stir when I inch out of bed, and when I turn back to look at her my heart feels like it could melt through its cavity and slide right out of my ass. Kind of like the heavy anxiety I’ve been carrying since I came home but different. I am awash with affection without the memories to back it up. Her hair is pulled back by a baby pink scrunchie (must be a family

heirloom because I know they don't make them like that anymore) and she has a thumb-sized smear of white paint on her jaw. Her mouth is wide open and she's snoring like a fat old man, but she appears soft, unthreatening.

She's less scary in her sleep, I think, and I'm suddenly mad at myself for fearing her in the first place. The only aggression I've seen has been a defense mechanism on my behalf.

My wife, the painter. It does seem nice. The... what do I do again? The [insert my job here] and her wife, the painter, and their fluffy dog, Van, the littlest spoon, all cuddled up in their dark house by the sea, shielded from the heat. For the first time I long to remember my life.

But I can't shake the feeling that something happened to us, Mia and me. Something that has dribbled even further to the edge of my recollection than my love for her. My memory is an old, worn couch. What I do remember sits atop the cushions and most of the memories from the last five years are spare change that rest beneath a groggy, six-inch layer of fluff and brain static, waiting to be pulled back up. But there are darker memories, too: a thin liquid that has soaked beneath the cushions, through the wood framing, and rests in a puddle on the cold floor below the couch. Everything I know about reading tone and body language would tell me that yesterday with Baxter was just Mia protecting me, but there was something behind her laser eyes that I can't grasp. Every time the injured wreckage of a memory bubbles up to the surface, it slips back down into the black water of my subconscious before I can grab it.

I feel a weight pressing on the back of my throat, as solid as if someone shoved their fist in my mouth. A tiny sob escapes, waking Van but not Mia. He looks sternly at me, a real *If you cry right now, you're a little bitch* stare, so I look away.

My bedroom, though still unfamiliar, is overwhelmingly inviting and I can feel myself getting sleepy again. The window unit hums softly and jostles the many plants sprouting out of old glass soda bottles. It is just chilly enough to want a light blanket and the warmth of another person, and the string lights on the ceiling emit tiny orbs of light just bright enough to make the dark room navigational. But I am too nervous to go back to sleep.

I should probably bathe, but I'm afraid that if I try unsupervised I'll get dizzy and crack my head open all over again. Plus, I'm not quite ready to endure the trauma of getting the right water temperature in an unfamiliar shower, so I just get dressed (in clothes that I am only eighty-five percent sure are mine).

The living room is covered in streamers and balloons. *WELCOME HOME LIV* is spelled out in paper letters over the TV. Baxter looks up from cutting out paper snowflakes at the coffee table to reveal his dime-sized pupils, then returns to his work with the mania all gay men are overcome with when prepping for a party.

“Mia and I decided on tortilla soup after you went to bed,” he says, still *snip snip* snipping away.

I can smell it now, the heaviness of corn tortilla, the bite of lime, and my stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. Reading my mind, Baxter snaps himself out of his decorating trance and suggests we have a bowl.

“Were Mia and I having problems before I got hurt?” I ask after my third bowl of soup.

Baxter fiddles with his spoon, looking reserved for the first time in his life. I slap him on the shoulder.

“I’m not telling Mia’s business like that. Stop trying to be slick.”

“*Mia’s* business?” I am appalled. *Whose* best friend is Baxter, again? “It’s my business too.”

“Fine, if you really want to know. You’ve been a real dick for months now. Before you got knocked out, I mean.”

I’m not surprised by this. “I guess I’m really not marrying material, then.”

Baxter laughs loudly but without joy. He asks me if I remember who I was five years ago. If I remember going home with a different woman from a different bar every night. I try to answer these questions but he informs me that they are rhetorical.

“You’d rather go back to that than living in this place with Mia?”

I don’t answer.

“Okay, well you didn’t have a *dog* five years ago. Isn’t that something?”

It’s six o’clock and people are beginning to arrive.

“Maybe we should have eased her in,” Mia says, staring out the window at all the cars and chewing her cuticle. “This is a lot, isn’t it? All these people at once?”

“Well, that nerd psychologist should have put ‘ease her in’ in her after-care packet,” Baxter says. “I’m sure at least one of those doctors could tell we’re both complete idiots.” He opens the door to the first guests.

I am roadkill with my guts strung out all over like silky ribbons, my body flattened so I can be easily passed over. I’m just another part of life for these people. “Oh, we’ve got to go to Liv’s party. She got smacked with a paint can and now we have to go to her house and remind her that we love her. Anyways, what’s for dinner tomorrow?” Even the people who are happiest to see me alive and well, I’m sure, are not feeling as much as me. I am feeling all there is to feel. I’ve never been more overstimulated in my life (that I can remember). I’ve never been hugged so many times by so many different people (*that I can remember*). I’m a deflated birthday balloon, hanging by the throat from someone’s mailbox.

My mother is on the couch laughing, wine cooler in hand, surrounded by a few of my friends from technical school, surely telling her favorite story about when I was five and got pinworms. From the roar of laughter I assume she’s reached the part where I wouldn’t stop crying because I thought I was turning into a dog and would have to go live at the pound because my mom’s allergic. Her favorite part, when the doctor told her I got it from eating contaminated dirt, is still to come. She never worries people will see her as a bad mother when she tells stories like this about my childhood. Maybe she shouldn’t. I guess a rich kid or two has eaten dirt.

Baxter is having his third bowl of soup and his fourth glass of wine, chatting with a woman who apparently fostered Van until Mia and I could take him. The woman is flushed and

won't stop giggling. I wonder if she knows that, despite his indiscriminate charisma, Baxter is queerer than a square donut.

Mia is standing in the kitchen with an older man she introduced to me as our wedding photographer, staring past him as he talks on and on and on. She needs rescuing, but I don't want to intrude. While I grapple with my *To save Mia or not to save Mia* struggle, she walks away from the wedding photographer in the middle of his lecture to approach me. He seems offended, but only for a second. A young blonde, Mia's college roommate I think she told me, walks past him and his eyes are suddenly locked on her ass.

"Wanna get out of here?" Mia is standing very close to me. Her neck is shiny with a thin layer of sweat and her cheeks are red beneath her freckles. Every light in the house is drawn to her. She's had a few but she's my wife so it's not weird, right? Surely I can take her for a walk without being accused of kidnapping.

We head down the street away from the ocean, toward the trailer parks and the gas stations and the cafes that start serving beer at noon and pay tween waitresses under the table. It's not long before we reach *Place*, a pastel trailer park that used to be [*Something*] *Place* but who knows what because the letters of the first word have been torn off.

"Here it is," Mia says, pulling me toward a tiny pink trailer. "My workshop. There's yours." She points to a whale-belly blue trailer adjacent to her own.

"What do I do again?" I ask, relieved to finally have a segue into this conversation.

"You're a door maker," she says, then laughs a long, drunken laugh, full of snorts and squeals. "You carve artisan doors for old rich people."

The artisan door maker and her wife, the painter. “Not as cool as being a painter, huh?”

Mia stops laughing. She explains that she’s been working on a secret mural for months and, because she’s been disappearing to her workshop constantly and sometimes overnight, I’ve been accusing her of cheating on me since she started the project. The accusations have caused a lot of fighting and alienation, a void between us like there never has been and suddenly I can feel it. I still don’t remember it, but I feel empty and heavy at the same time. I feel a hundred miles away from her even though she’s standing right here, drunkenly leaning into me.

She says I followed her to her workshop a couple weeks ago, thinking I was going to catch her in the act, but instead I found her working on her mural, and that’s how I got hurt. We swore not to go into each other’s workshops without permission because it can be dangerous, and, as she thought she was alone, she had paint cans carelessly hung about on her scaffolding.

“Like I would say I’m going to my workshop up the street and go somewhere else to cheat, or worse, cheat on you *in* my workshop that’s a hundred feet from yours. I’m not an idiot.” But she isn’t talking to me. She’s talking to pre-knockout Liv, and I let her. I owe it to her. “And the worst part is,” she says, crying now. “Even after you *saw* I wasn’t cheating, you still couldn’t trust me. I told you to go to the hospital right away for a scan but you wouldn’t. You said you were fine and that’s why your brain got pressure-washed with blood.”

“It does feel cleaner,” I say like some kind of idiot, and Mia cries harder.

I begin to remember some of this. I remember it like I would remember a movie I saw once, but it’s enough to be overwhelmed with guilt. I want to apologize right away but my curiosity gets the best of me.

“Why was the mural a secret?”

Mia's workshop is littered with at least fifty paintings. They come in many different sizes and a few different frames, but I soon notice that they are all the exact same painting, each an identical picture of a beach sunset, seagulls in the sky.

"I sell them to tourists for twenty bucks apiece," she says. "If you couldn't guess, this isn't what my parents are thinking when they brag to their friends that their daughter's art pays her bills." She goes on to say that she's been unhappy with her life, but feels foolish about it. She kept the mural a secret because she didn't feel right for thinking she deserves better than flea-marketing paintings.

I want to console her, tell her that there's nothing wrong with what she does, or wanting more, but before I can, I notice the mural, a titan rich with color. It, too, is a beach sunset, but not like the ones Mia paints to make her living. The mural is astounding, incredible, some other big words I've probably learned in the last five years but haven't remembered yet. This poor woman, this truly talented woman, probably has to grit her teeth every weekend as she hands a sixty-year-old man a carbon copy corny painting and he says, "Your boyfriend must love having an artist around." This woman has to listen to her parents prattle on about her false successes, longing to correct them but feeling ungrateful for the luck she's had in her trade. This woman has spent months just trying to squeeze more juice out of her life and I saw that as a crime, had the gall to not trust her because of it.

"We have a kid, too," Mia says, a statement that jerks me back against the wall.

"Oh, god, the children's hand soap."

She laughs. “Wait, what? I’m just fucking with you to lighten the mood. We don’t have a kid. We just like the way kid soap smells.”

I laugh so hard I cry and hug Mia for the first time since I got out of the hospital. It feels more natural than I thought it would. I smell coconut shampoo and sweat on her, the nicest scent I’ve ever witnessed, and the high tide of emotion washes a memory up to the forefront of my brain.

I am in my dark bedroom and I am hurting. Did I fall asleep in my clothes? I turn the lamp on but it’s still hard for me to see. A train plows through my head, from one ear to the other, circling around in front of my eyes so I am completely blind for a second, then back into my ear. I grab for Mia but she is not here. She went to sleep on the couch tonight. I try to stand but I fall. Sour, burning vomit. I cry out and she is here. She is screaming into the phone. “511 Oceanside! Are you fucking deaf?!” Her voice changes as she addresses me. “I told you, I told you.” But it is not the usual I told you so. She isn’t angry with me but with the big, heavy hand that is trying to drag me away. It’s getting harder for me to see, to understand words. “Zzz zzz awake!” She is begging me to stay awake through Operation buzzes. The heavy hand grabs my skull and squeezes and I shriek like a little kid. One last conscious thought pulls itself above the water: I am never going to see her again and it’s all my fault. I am drowning. Dog fur brushing against me. Someone else’s tears and snot on my face. Coconut shampoo. Black.

I’m for-real crying now, not laugh-crying.

“Let’s visit the water,” she whispers.

The briny air bites the inside of my nose, a sensation too familiar to sneeze out. We decided to take a longer walk to reach a nicer part of the beach, further from the hotels. I look up at the sky and lose my breath. The stars stare back at me, winking like there's a secret between us. I look over at Mia. She is looking up too, and I am suddenly frightened that I briefly forgot how to love her. Without all the light pollution, we can see that we (Mia, me, and the ten other drunk people on this part of the beach) are just bugs trapped under a spaghetti strainer.

Maybe I wasn't meant to be here five years ago, and maybe I'm not meant to be here in another five years, but I belong here right now. We all belong here: Baxter, my wife (the painter), Van, me, and all the young hicks who are just here to get their rocks off for spring break.