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## Sixteenth Street

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## SIXTEENTH STREET

I lived in the house with three others, a painter, a receptionist and a teacher of dance.

Ian, the teacher of dance, never unpacked his boxes. He and his lover would stop by for clothes, trailing words, and again you would hear the one-two of car doors and the car itself as it rose toward the wide open mouth of Sixteenth Street.

Gunnar, the painter, worked half-time at a shelter and slept on a cot in his room, which was more an atelier. He kept that door closed, but I'd glimpsed the spare work of his hand: long paintings of figures, black on white, a fullness of limb and breast and ass in the freedom of after-sex.

Mina, the last of my housemates, had no car, in fact didn't drive. She walked straight into the eye of the sun to catch the bus to work; I'd squint, maybe wave, then drive the other way, through the park. I worked in a diner.

One guy, a chef, told stories about race tracks and horses, a world he'd left behind long ago when he moved to the city.

I thought about telling one of these stories to Mina, but the stories weren't mine.

I said, If I close my eyes I can still feel my arm with the spatula.

The television bent its light in silence. She knew to laugh.

She said, I was on my way back here yesterday. There were no seats. I had hold of the strap and was rocking slightly, like going to sleep. I thought, I could take this bus right up Sixteenth Street. I could keep going. All the way. And get off at the end and walk back to my parents' house. Be sleeping again in my bed.

I laughed—but at what?

The parents Mina had mentioned would sometimes

appear with warehouse purchases: crates of mandarin oranges, tubs of fresh spinach, bricks of white cheese, and huge bags of rice, awkwardly crimped in the hook of an arm like a little dead body.

Mina would thank them, but she never ate much.

She kept her room neat. One time she had me in there, and I thought, from beneath the words I was saying and hearing, that we might relent in some way, just give what our bodies could give in the shift of the light.

Did she have the same notion?

We sat at the foot of her bed. She flipped the gold clasps of a velvet-lined case she'd taken from underneath, and I said, A trumpet.

She shook her head. Flugelhorn.

She lifted it out and held it there, in her hands, sort of dripping with shine. I sat in thick witness: the bends of its silvery pipes; the lavish spread of its bell.

Play it, I said without clearing my throat.

But again she shook her head.

I rued all the little silences, which held us like rests in a score.

She left in November. By then the weather had turned. For three days I was off the schedule and didn't go out; rain beat at the window and made of the glass a crabbed placard of blur. On the first night, I downloaded music, formed a playlist for myself. On the next night, I turned on the TV but immediately turned it off. On the third night I was starving and made a small feast out of Mina's abandoned store—the rice, the lentils, all of it. I used spices, weird herbs in unmarked jars I'd found in the back of a cupboard. I birthed a rich steam, which floated the stairwell, snaked the transom above Gunnar's door.

He stood blinking, not really processing yet. What is it? he finally said.

Mouth full, I just gestured. It was rice. It was lentils. It was some spinach that hadn't gone bad. Lots of fruit. Lots of toast, with a five-set of jellies and jams: marmalade, lemon curd, apricot, seedless raspberry, apple butter.

Gunnar's eyes wouldn't work.

Sit down, I said to him, but I didn't stop eating to wait. I kept my mouth low. I ate hard, and without any rush. There was more of the rice, more of the fruit, more of everything.