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Demolition Plan

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DEMOLITION PLAN

“YOU LOOK NICE today,” Rowan says when he gets a good look at me. I’m in the kitchen, slicing baby peppers pole to pole, and to be fair I’m dressed much nicer than I need to be for cooking, and to be fair I also don’t probably need to have my hair in long dragging beachy waves for this, but I think we’ve also gotten to the point in our relationship when he’s just used to my hair being around his food. Our relationship stretches out in my head like a galaxy and I have no idea when in that empty expanse it became okay, but I’m pretty sure it did. I wish there had been a signpost.

“Thanks,” I say. I don’t want to give it too much attention. Being dressed up to stay home shouldn’t be a thing we talk about. I’m embarrassed by it.

“Did you go into the office today?”

“It’s not an office. And no. Worked from home.” I slip the knife into the crunching structure of the peppers and feel them bleed a bit on me. “I think I get more done at home when I don’t have to listen to people clipping their nails in the next cube over.”

He shrugs. “That’s a rite of passage though. If you don’t hear people clipping their toenails at work, what will you have to commiserate over with the rest of us?”

My necklace itches my neck. Rowan is walking around the breakfast bar. He’ll hug me. It will make me feel squirmy. It goes down the

way I expect, my arms trapped by my sides and my eyes on the walls, which also seem too close. We're off balance and I'm still holding the knife, careful not to slide it into him. He's saying that he understands why I didn't follow our routine today, but that I need to try again tomorrow. If he says it with a hug, I can't get defensive.

"Did you go to the grocery store?"

I shake my head. He's not looking. He's already way down the hall, might as well be over a horizon. "Did you get the mail?" I yell after him. He didn't—I know he didn't because it's not here in front of me, but I know if I ask he'll go get it for me and I won't have to walk down two flights of stairs and smell our neighbor's cigarettes.

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ROWAN MAKES US whiskey sours after dinner and we curl up on the couch with the laptop to cruise Craigslist, not routine but agreed upon. We're quiet, thinly clothed, comfortable—he clicks, I read over his shoulder. There's something crunchy in the buttons of his mouse—I hear it break a bit with every click.

"Some people are really racist," I say after a while.

He nods. We move on. We find a few ads that are interesting enough to both of us, which we know without really even talking.

"Do you want to email, or should I?"

"You."

“Why me?”

“Because I’ll be nervous about checking my email for days.”

“I will too.”

“But you don’t have to check your email for work. I do. I can’t not.”

“We don’t have to do this. If you’re not into it. If it’s causing you anxiety.”

“I want to do it. I just need you to help me.”

He writes the email. I copyedit. He presses send and then, riding the buzz of anticipation and alcohol, catches my eye, gauges carefully, slips his fingers into my hair, slides to my scalp, grips. I burn bright. No need to say anything.

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WE GET A fairly quick response, I think, but maybe I don’t know what’s normal, only know what’s avoidant. Rowan texts me from work, interrupting a conversation with my mother. I’m swearing up and down that I just don’t have time to drive to Madison for a week—can’t leave my work for that long, Mom, I’ll see you at Christmas if you don’t come here first. No, I can’t manage and write the blogs from there. I have her on speaker, so I see it when the text message pops up. I’m cross-legged on our new couch, alternating between staring at the dull gray wall and staring at the bright void of my computer screen. I could lean a bit and find myself confronted with the boundaries of the room.

They want to get dinner first, Rowan says.

Make it happen, I say, and I say “No, Mom, I can’t. I just can’t come up there right now.” I feel like dinner is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask for. I like to believe I’m the kind of person who would just ask for a coffee date, but dinner is fine.

Maybe Il Vicolo, I say. Every time we’ve gone, we’ve been seated at the same table—by the front window, so I can watch everybody come in on one side and turn my head and watch the whole restaurant. And we haven’t been there in a while. Sometimes when I haven’t been to a place in a while, I think about how people confuse light years for a measurement of time rather than distance. I think they can be both, in that special way that things can be everything everybody believes.

Awful fancy, he says. *I’ll pick a night with them.*

They’ll just think we’re classy. Until they see our home.

Mom has moved on from me, I think. But also, her mind is still in Madison, where it’s been this whole conversation. She’s just stopped imagining me there with her.

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LATER. I’M NAKED, tweezing my eyebrows, leaning way into the bathroom mirror with all the torso I’ve been allotted, letting the dark hairs drift down into the sink where I might just blame them on Rowan. I’ve been consulting with a friend about how her boobs look in a dress. I feel weird about this,

but maybe she and I are reaching a different point in that friendship. I don't really understand these organic things. I would like relationships better if they came with rungs I could climb. I might look down and see the span stretch and distort with vertigo, but at least I could see a rung in my fingers.

Rowan comes home from work. I think about wrapping a towel around myself but don't bother. The door is open and I can hear him calling me, but I don't say anything because really, it's not that big of an apartment and I can practically see the front door in the mirror. I know just where to stand, just where to lean, to hold every inch of the apartment in my senses.

"Tomorrow night," he says, because why not get right to the point, even if I don't like being ambushed with these things. "They said they love Il Vicolo."

"Oh," I say. Maybe they know it better than we do. Maybe they have a different favorite table, where they sit amidst everybody else. Maybe it's in a different waiter's section and we won't have Lloyd serving us.

"What time?"

"Six," he says, and slides an arm around my side. I haven't leaned back from the mirror, and he slips behind me, a hand on each hip, but I give his reflection a look and he laughs.

"You're right. I should ditch my work clothes first."

When he goes to the bedroom, he's in the one part of the apartment I can't see in the mirror or from the front door—the safest, deepest part. We rarely even turn on the lights in there—just creep into bed and fumble around at the right times.

“Do they seem cool?” I call after him.

“I mean, as cool as you can seem in an email.”

I don’t know what that means.

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I DON’T GET out of bed the next day when I’m supposed to. Rowan is mad at me at first, which I know he will be and am okay with—it’s better than trying to go out. It’s too much today. When he texts me around noon, it’s a peace offering, a reminder of a shared commitment to the day’s agenda.

So I’ll pick you up at like 5:50, ok?

I’m in the kitchen, making a smoothie, running the blender one-handed and trying to text real words back. I’ve changed clothes three times today, and right now I’ve got a shirt and necklace but no pants. Chrissy Hynde rattles the windows when she catches them just right. The next-door neighbors are home sick, both of them, and before I put the music on I could hear their coughing through the walls, a hacking assault. I’m not alone enough. I lean against the oven.

Yeah. That’s fine.

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WHEN ROWAN POPS back in, I see that he’s dressed more hipster-professional than normal today—blue tweed pants, brown belt, over-patterned shirt.

There's a little too much gel in his hair and he fiddles with his glasses every few seconds, like each millimeter they slip down his nose is actually a mile.

"You look great," he tells me. "Like, you know. A good mix between respectable and sexy."

"That's what I aim for," I say. He's being careful to perform as required. Tell me I look ok. Be on time. Be predictable. He'll drive the same route we always do, I'm sure. Won't ask that we walk. I close my computer without saving. I know he notices, but he doesn't say anything about that either. "Do you have to do anything to get ready?"

"Nope, I'm good," he says. I don't say that I need more time. We're running out of time if we don't want to be late, which is worse than leaving anxious. I go in for a hug. "It's not a big deal, Abbs," he tells me. "We're just getting to know them. If it's not chill, we never have to see them again."

"Until we run into them at the grocery store or something," I say. "Or at the park. Or we find out that one of them works with you."

"It's a big city. I think you're stretching a bit."

"It's a small world." I let my hand navigate down his arm to his fingers and let go of the rest of him. "What if one of them comes to work with me? People move in and out of that place all the time." One of my greatest dislikes of coworking is that you never know who will be sitting next to you; you can only assume anonymity as you launch your blog empire.

"Ready?"

I nod. I walk. When we get to the door he opens it. The hallway stinks of cat piss and cigarettes, even though it looks clean and respectable.

It's a wall of things that my apartment is not.

"It smells fucking horrible," I say.

"I keep saying we need to move," Rowan says, but he doesn't say the other things that logically follow that statement. We need to find a place. We need to talk to a leasing agency. We need to prove income. I need to pull my weight more. Go outside more.

I can do none of these things.

"I can't go," I say, two steps beyond the door.

"Why not?" he asks. He's pulling on me a bit.

"I can't."

He sighs. His brain downshifts. "How can I make it easier?"

"You can't. I can't go."

"Just take a deep breath." He watches me. I do it twice. My brain keeps skittering. "Do I need to cancel?"

It begins to feel like a dawn, a mist, a tide, an enveloping, a drowning. The world is there, but it's becoming less important than the froth in my brain. "No. You have to go. We can't cancel. Just tell them I wasn't feeling well. You should have asked for pictures from them. Pictures would have helped."

"They're still going to want to meet you."

"Just tell them about me. Show them pictures of me. Have a drink. Have fun. I trust your judgment." In fact, for me their personalities matter very little—it might be more fun not to meet them first. The meeting is mostly for them. They wanted it.

“Yeah, but you trusting me doesn’t solve the problem. They will still want to meet you. So they know I’m not some creeper.”

“If it goes well, just set something up for this weekend. Sunday, maybe.” A few days is enough to prepare mentally. This was too much of a surprise. Too quick. “For here, obviously. I mean, I doubt they have a king-sized bed.”

“Why on earth do you doubt that?”

I shrug. “I just do.”

He starts down the stairs. He’s mad at me again.

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I GET UNDRESSED. It’s a relief. I hang up my necklace. I hang up my dress, stand my boots in the closet with their peers. I try to eat dinner, but it ends up just being some crackers and cream cheese and pepper jelly. Rowan is probably trying to keep his enthusiasm for risotto to polite levels while I eat Triscuits. I can still hear the neighbors coughing to one side, so I turn up the music again.

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LATER. I SWITCH to headphones because I have manners, although I think it would also be polite for them to just take some medicine. It’s very dark outside, and everything outside the windows has basically disappeared. I

pull the curtains closed and things disappear for real, replaced with the safety of dull fabric. Because it's late, I go to the bedroom and slip under the covers, but because it's also early and because things are different, I don't fall asleep, I just keep listening to music. I wonder why Rowan isn't home yet. Maybe they really hit it off. Maybe he went back to their place after they killed two bottles of wine. Maybe they liked him so much that they didn't even feel like they needed me, figured they'd try things without me. I can think about their bodies touching, and I can feel the friction they could feel, the heat, the need of it, but I can't construct a room for them to do it in, so I figure that means it can't actually be happening. If it was a thing that could happen, I should be able to imagine it fully. And surely it wouldn't be so vanilla.

I get up and take half a Xanax. Just to take the edge off until Rowan gets home.

Maybe they got into a fight over the bill. Rowan does always order the special there, and he can hold more than his fair share of alcohol. Maybe it was going swimmingly but then it all fell apart and glasses of wine were thrown and Rowan is still shamefully helping the waiter clean up in the restaurant.

Maybe they're just still sitting at the bar. I can picture that. There are upside-down glasses, bottles of gin and whiskey and bourbon and vodka arranged on the wall, spotlit. I can feel how the barstools feel under your legs, especially bare legs. I can hear the languid trickle of people leaving as their shifts end. Something about the light in there always makes Rowan

look tanner than he really is. The light in our apartment makes me look like a vampire. Lack of sun makes me look like a vampire.

I'm not facing the bedroom door, and I don't hear anything, but I know, through some unarticulated sense, that the room has changed and so I turn over and take my headphones out of my ears. Rowan is standing there, and invisible to me but clearly, raucously, present are two other people, a man and a woman, laughing in the hallway.

"Hey," Rowan says.

"What the fuck." Hiss. Be quiet. Hide. Can't run, can't fight.

"They really wanted to meet you."

I think all of my consciousness is in my heart, in the opening and closing of each of its doors, in the filling and emptying of its rooms. Except for the bit of me that's in my ears still and can hear drum hits leaking from my headphones.

"And really, we hit it off so well, I just kind of figured, why wait for the weekend? I think all three of us are trying to be more impulsive." This is the wrong thing. But he doesn't seem to realize it's the wrong thing for me.

There's a bit of me in my nose, too, I think. I can smell wine on him. And my tongue. I didn't brush my teeth. I can taste my own wine.

"What do I do?" I ask. Small. Smaller on the inside than the outside.

"Just meet them!" he says. "Hey, guys, come in here and meet Abbs."

"Rowan!" But it's late, my understanding of space-time is wrong

and they're already in the room as I'm saying it. The woman, tall, curvy, backlit, looks somewhat embarrassed when her shadow casts itself over me in bed.

"I think you should have given her a moment to get up, Rowan," she says mildly.

"Nah, it's fine. Abbs, I told them loads about you and they just really wanted to come see you." The man stands behind his wife—I can see their rings, modest, but hers does glimmer a little. Rowan comes over and turns on the bedside lamp and I can see them a bit more clearly. "This is Drew and Phoebe," he tells me. Drew has lingering acne scars, which he's tried to cover up with facial hair, and Phoebe's eyes drift a bit, but they aren't bad looking at all. Their clothes say young-but-established professional, which I find comforting, because their clothes fall into the same style as my own, careful replications of advertisements. They're just Rowan and me in a few years, if I could go out and if Rowan had acne scars. I wave. Awkward. Wrong.

"Rowan told us a bit about you and what you're into," Phoebe says. I don't say these are supposed to be secret things, mine to give out, now uncollectable. I suppose these are things I should trust Rowan with.

Drew nods with his wife. He seems like the quieter one, although that doesn't really mean anything—it just means that I can't find what he's thinking if I go looking for it. "We were thinking maybe we could play around a bit, if you're feeling up to it. If not, we can just chill. Maybe have a drink. Whatever you think is right for you."

“I mean...I don't know,” I say. “You guys are here, kinda feel like it's not a choice.”

Phoebe looks at me oddly. “Of course it is. All you have to do is say no.”

Rowan reads the room and suggests that they give us a minute, but Phoebe suggests that she and I talk instead. “Just give us a couple of minutes,” she says. The men nod and duck out. I hear Rowan say something about beer in the fridge.

“May I?” She asks, and nods at the bed. Again, there isn't really a choice for me here. There's nowhere else for her to sit in the room, unless she sits on the floor, and you can't have a guest sit on the floor, and if she stands then there's an air of physical dominance to the way she uses the space, I have to look up at her, and that doesn't seem right either. She sits down next to me, in Rowan's spot, and I shove my phone and headphones to the floor. I'm a bit embarrassed by the Ikea bedsheets. I didn't wash them. I didn't know. Am I supposed to have more interesting stuff on the wall than this? We can't even paint because of our landlord.

We sit for a minute. I think she's letting me work through the fact that she is here, in my place, without my permission, and to be honest it's the best thing she could do because everything feels destabilized, like I could look in the bathroom mirror and not see the front door, sit on the couch and not reach out and touch the wall, and like Rowan and Drew are a million miles away, though the sound of their voices moves faster across those miles than light ever could. I can't let my heart race because

she'll hear it. I can't breathe fast because she'll hear it. I can't leave the bed because this is my place, and I can't go anywhere else because those places are not my places, and in some corner of myself I'm so deeply angry with Rowan because these are all things that he knows but can't feel. So I wait for the moment I hope will come, the moment when it all stops, when the molecules that make up the bed and the walls and the dirty carpet stop spinning, when the atoms re-bond. The moment when my brain is the mountains in winter, smoothed with snow that glues together even the tiniest pine needle nerve endings into something single, smooth, unpocketed, devoid of details.

I wonder how much Rowan instructed her. How much he told her about me.

I turn to Phoebe—I can see it's what she's been waiting for, though she expects words—and I kiss her. With my eyes closed I can ignore the geography of the room and focus on topography, on navigating rises and falls in flesh, the smooth of buttons, the harsh polyester of her shirt rasping between our skin. I can appreciate her climate of heat, a dry heat really, and the relieving cool wind of breath as she whispers what the safe word will be, and reminds me that there will be no surprises, no borders will be transgressed, but also that they brought some of their own toys, since they figured we didn't have enough to go around. The click of the door opening might as well be the cleaving of tectonic plates, but I cling to the terrain, feeling the ridge of a c-section scar.

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LATER, FLOATING, UNMOORED, I wait for Phoebe to be done in the bathroom, then slip in awkwardly after her, wordlessly, though she smiles at me. I wonder if this means she enjoyed her face forced between my legs, the inconsistent pressure between me and her tongue as Rowan fucked her from behind and her husband watched, waiting to switch in. A lot for a smile to say. I don't know if it's appropriate to tell her I'd like to do this again. In the bathroom I slip off the bits of clothing that were destroyed, a shirt that now gapes in front, panties torn down the back, intact only at the waistband. I throw them in the hamper even though that's not the right place for them. I come back out in my bathrobe to find Rowan and Drew washing toys in the kitchen sink, and that doesn't seem like the right place for that either. Phoebe, with intact clothes, emerges from my bedroom and we smile at each other again. I think my nipples are hard in the cold, sore from teeth and clamps, and I cross my arms to hide them. I think she smiles a little more when she tells me it was nice to meet me and that she hopes she made me feel comfortable.

When they're gone, with me waving awkwardly in the hallway, where I've rooted myself, away from the bedroom and away from the front door, Rowan slips his arms around me and I lean into it, hoping to get closer than I physically can. "Should we go to bed?" he asks. He's sleepy, like he always gets, and he smells like Phoebe's fruity body spray and Drew's deodorant.

“Yeah,” I say. I cross my arms again when he releases me. “I’ll be in in a minute.” He gets himself some water while I stand there and kisses me on the cheek as he walks by. I feel too tall for the room, as though everything is bent in the cruelest, most subtle of funhouses. He leaves the bedroom door open and I approach it, hugging the wall, hoping I’m in a place where he can’t see me, and then stop at the frame, and find myself unable to push my way in.